

THE
BARON OF ILL-FAME

A ROMANCE OF FLORENCE
IN THE TIME OF DANTE

BY
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PREFACE

IN tracing the careers of both Corso Donati and Giano della Bella, history has been closely followed. The characters of Filippo and of Leonora are, on the other hand, entirely fictitious, and of Uguccone's daughter little is known beyond the fact that she became the second, or according to some authorities, the third wife of Corso.

The crime which forms the subject of Chapter XV. is unhesitatingly imputed to Corso by the chronicler, Ferretus Vicentinus.

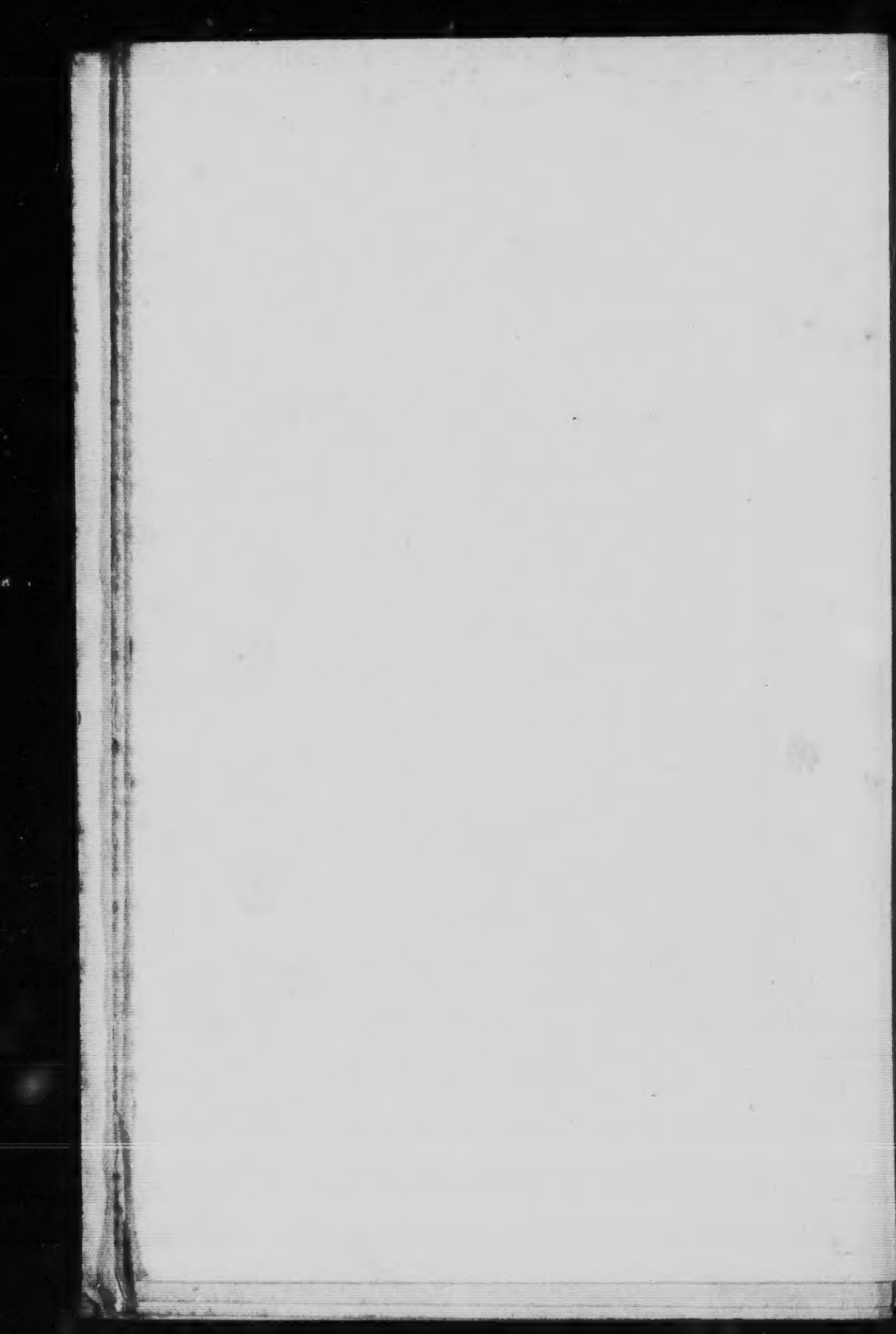
A slight anachronism has been made in introducing Cunizza as a contemporary of Piccarda. The former had died, in all probability, before 1290.

The title, "Baron of Ill-Fame," is suggested by the nickname bestowed on Corso Donati in Florence, though not an actual translation of it.

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THE BARON OF ILL-FAME

CHAPTER I

A FLORENTINE FEAST.

ON a December afternoon in the year 1292 a party of Florentines were assembled round a banqueting-board in the Donati Palace. At the head of it was seated a man of singularly handsome and attractive appearance, whose courtly manners and distinguished bearing proclaimed at once his noble birth, while in addition to this he carried with him the indisputable air of one born to rule and destined to make his mark in the world. The broad, full brow, the strongly-moulded chin, the flashing fire in the bold, dark eye, were but the outward sign and token of that inherent individuality which marks some men out at once from their fellows.

Opposite to him at the far end of the table sat a youth of some twenty years, whose likeness at once proclaimed his relationship, though in him the traits of his father were softened and modified ; but while some of both the strength and fascination were lost, his features bore the mark of an intellectuality and earnestness of purpose

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which gave them a distinctiveness and interest of their own.

Corso Donati, for such was the host's name, was paying but slight attention to the jests and light laughter which were being circulated with the wine round his table. His attention was for the moment concentrated on one who sat at his right hand, and whose grave, somewhat saturnine cast of countenance was in strong contrast to his own. Matters of deep and serious import would seem to be under discussion between them, and when a remark was addressed to Corso by one near the bottom of the board it had twice to be repeated before he heard. A louder burst of merriment than usual at this remark at last attracted his attention, and he turned to the speaker, a younger brother of his own, whose handsome but weak countenance bore the marks of that good cheer which he loved too well.

"What would you, Forese?" he asked good-humouredly. "I was somewhat absorbed for the moment in the conversation of my good friend della Tosa, and if I failed in my duties as a host, that should serve as an extenuating plea."

"I want more wine," said Forese with a slight hic-cough, and holding an elegantly wrought metal cup upside down to prove its emptiness.

"Good Filippo here;" he added, pointing to his nephew, "hath tried in vain for the past ten minutes to persuade thee to pass the flagon this way. Meanwhile we are parched."

"It strikes me that thou wert none the worse an I had remained deaf a little longer," said Corso with an indulgent smile as he passed the wine. "With all thy

lore, Forese, there is one thing thou hast never yet learnt, and that is when to stop if good wine or choice food be in reach."

"There are only two things which make me thirsty," said Forese, helping himself with an unsteady hand, "and those are a host who presses the wine on you, and a host who does not. Both have the same effect on me ;" and he burst into loud laughter.

"And as thou needs must have one or the other at every feast, 'tis easy to guess the result," laughed Corso. "I grudge thee not the wine ; all I ask is that thou shouldst refrain from seeking the society of Donna Nella afterwards until thou hast somewhat recovered from the effects. My fair sister-in-law is irresistible when she appeals to me to keep thee sober with tears in those bright eyes of hers."*

A slight change passed over the features of the drunkard at the mention of his wife, whom, in spite of all the pain he caused her by his intemperance, he fondly loved.

"In truth," he said, "I will drink no more after this cup, and Nella shall only see me as steady as the tower which our good friend here, Messer Giotto, is going to build in our city."

"Not so fast, Messer Forese, not so fast," said a man from the opposite side of the table, whose features, of a striking plainness when in repose, were redeemed when he spoke by the vivacity of his expression and the humourous gleam in his eye. "The tower is but on a very unsteady foundation at present, since it exists but in the brain of a poor artist. 'Twere well for you to seek a better model for your sobriety."

* See Dante, *Pur.* xxiii., 87.

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"Sobriety go hang," said Forese, with the inconsequence of the half-intoxicated. "In truth, I say that there are but two things worth living for in this world, wine and song." At this he emptied his cup and, leaning back in his seat, gazed round at the company as if to challenge a denial.

"And love;" said another, "and for my part I place it first," and he hastily trolled :

"When veiled Love his dart first aimed at me,
How sore the wound inflicted on this heart;
But quick the ointment his soft hands apply
To heal the bleeding and remove its smart.
And o'er my senses Love now holds its sway;
Bright eyes my beacon, and soft smiles my goal;
Without it in a dreary world I stray,
Love is the sunlight to this weary soul:
Then hail sweet Love, let Love to me appear,
Of all delights I hold sweet Love most dear."

"Bravo, Guido!" said Corso, with the indulgent smile of one to whom such pleasures as poetry and song appealed but slightly. "Truly, for an impromptu it were not bad."

"I can furnish you with other verses since I am in the vein," said the young man, turning a slightly flushed face to his host, "provided, of course, that it be not displeasing to the company."

A disclaiming chorus dispelled any doubt on this point.

"Go on, go on, good Guido—a song an it please thee," cried several voices.

"And let it be to your latest fair lady," laughed Giotto; "mark you, Messer Guido, to your very latest."

A burst of laughter greeted this sally, for Guido's fickleness in affairs of the heart was proverbial.

"There is no latest," he said; "I love them all, and where each is so charming, who is to choose?"

"Such are not the sentiments of our friend, the young Dante, son of Alighieri," said Giotto.

"'Tis true," replied Guido. "For constancy, who hath ever seen the like of Dante? and his songs and sonnets were all, 'tis said, indited for the same fair lady, whose death he mourned so long. But though he showed these writings to me, he refrained ever from mentioning by name the lady of his affection."

"He keeps the matter very close then," said Corso, "for 'tis well known that he looks upon Guido Cavalcanti as the first among his friends."

"That's as it may be," said Guido, but his light, flippant manner had nevertheless changed to one somewhat more serious since the name of his friend had been brought into the conversation. "Young Alighieri is of a most reserved nature and confides his love story not even to me, whom he honours with his friendship."

"Now come, Messer Guido," said another of the guests with a smile, "are thou not in truth somewhat over-modest? Surely it is on Dante that the honour of the friendship falls. Thou art of greater age and attainments, of nobler birth and higher position than this young son of Alighieri, who, after all, would seem to be somewhat foolish and scatter-brained."

"Unsay those words," cried Guido, whose bearing had suddenly changed, the indolent, slightly cynical manner giving way to one of indignant wrath, while his hand flew instinctively to the dagger at his belt. "No

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foolish, scatter-brained youth is Dante Alighieri, as I, who am proud to be called his friend, know how to testify."

"In truth, I meant no harm," muttered the other.

"Thou deservest that this dagger should force thee to eat those lying words," said Guido with flashing eyes, and still half reluctant to abstain from the fight ever welcome to his belligerent spirit. But here Corso hastily interposed.

"Come, gentlemen," he said, "let us have no quarrelling at this board. Guido, you do well to defend your friend, yet, after all, there may also be something in what good Messer Lorenzo says, for much it seems as if young Dante were failing to fulfil the promise of a distinguished future which we had hoped might be his. He hath a decided turn for politics, and might well rise even to rule the city as one of the Priors, if he would leave his dreaming and poetizing alone. How bravely, too, he fought against the Aretines on the field of Campaldino I can myself testify, since, as you know, I also was in the thick of that fray."

"That no true Florentine is likely to forget," said another voice. "Though not there myself I have often heard tell by my son, who was present, of the gallantry with which Messer Corso suddenly charged in the midst of the foe."

"That charge was like to have cost me my head as penalty," laughed Corso. "But had I allowed obedience to outweigh patriotism and continued to wait apart with my brave knights until I received my orders, it were in truth hard to say how the day might have gone."

"'Twas indeed thy disobedience which all say turned

the tide," said the former speaker; "and who, in truth, could lag behind when thy brave words were heard, 'If we lose, I can but die in the battle, and if we conquer, let him that will come to exact the penalty'! Oh! that was a great moment for Florence."

"Here's to the hero of Campaldino, our host of to-night," cried another voice, and in response cups were eagerly emptied.

In truth, Corso Donati had never stood higher in the estimation of his fellow-citizens than now, and the victory over the Aretines at Campaldino, in which he had played so important a part some three years earlier, still shed its glory over him. Handsome, brave, debonair, and above all singularly courtly and fascinating in manner, there is little to be wondered at if he took a leading position among the nobles of his day. That this popularity did not extend to the lower classes of the community, however, is sufficiently proved by the nickname of *Barone Malefami*,* which was bestowed upon him at about this time, a title which his subsequent acts of cruelty and oppression were, unfortunately, soon to justify.

And now a pause occurred in the gay interchange of jest and laughter, and Guido Cavalcanti was again called upon for the promised song, and no sooner had he ceased than Forese, anxious not to be outdone by a brother poet, started also on some verses of his own, recently set to music by the young Florentine composer Casella. The attempt proved a failure owing to the condition of the poet and singer, who was no longer sufficiently sober to control his voice, and, amid much boisterous merriment, the discomfited Forese resumed his seat.

* Literally Baron Do-me-Evil.

Meanwhile the host leant back in his chair with only partially concealed weariness, and it was with relief that he now saw his guests begin to disperse. Some places, indeed, had already become vacant. Young Filippo Donati had quietly slipped away before he had been obliged to drink more wine than was good for him, and Giotto and one or two others of the more sober spirits had speedily followed him.

When the last of the gay revellers had departed, Corso turned to the grave individual who still sat at his right hand.

"We can now have our private conversation," he said, and rising as he spoke, he led his guest into a separate apartment which opened out of the great banquetting-hall.

CHAPTER II

AN EVIL GENIUS

"BE seated, della Tosa," said Corso. "We have not finished our talk and, while those gay and foolish comrades from whom we have parted have been confusing their brains with wine, I for my part have but taken enough to make my wits the sharper. If you can spare me another hour, I shall be glad."

"My time is yours," replied della Tosa, "and I have no more pressing demand on it than a further discussion with you. As you say, the wine which sinks the wits of fools in confusion, serves but to sharpen those wise enough to know how much to drink. Let us take our leisure for the discussion in detail of those weighty matters already broached between us."

He leant back carelessly in his chair, with one leg thrown over the other and his finger-tips pressed lightly together.

Corso moved a little restlessly. He was apparently not quite at his ease with della Tosa, whose calm, imperturbable manner had something almost sinister about it. It might have been imagined that he held some secret power over the proud and domineering noble, whose spirit he seemed able to subdue, but this was not exactly the case. Corso's mind was apt to move

freely and untrammelled, and if he shrank from the influence of his companion, it was but the unconscious effect of his better nature, which recoiled from the reflection of his own baser self. The nobler and loftier instincts of his soul were as yet in abeyance, but not stifled or destroyed as they were later to become. He would have shrunk in horror at this time from the vision of those crimes with which ere long his name and memory were to be stained. The flame of an overmastering ambition, which was destined to consume his soul, was as yet but smouldering ; the dark and deep designs which were to minister to his passion for power were still but vague and formless shapes. But in the dark, inscrutable countenance before him he might, had he been able to foresee the future, have recognised one of the two influences which were to be the evil geniuses of his life, and have seen in his companion one whose hands would sow the seed which was to ripen to ignoble fruit, whose breath would fan the flames which were eventually to consume his soul. But of this Corso did not think, any more than he did of the other still more powerful force which later in the same evening was to twine itself round his life, twisting it into strange, tortuous directions at present concealed from his vision.

" It is true, then, as you say," he said at length, " the *popolani*, including also the *grassi*,* grow more and more violent against ourselves, and, led on by that detestable Giano della Bella, may go to any lengths unless speedily checked."

* The people of Florence were divided into the *popolani grassi* or superior citizens and professional classes, and the *popolani minuti* or working classes.

" 'Tis indeed so," replied della Tosa, " unless something be speedily done, Florence will once more be the scene of a revolution, but this time it will be a more deadly one than that of smoking palaces and blood-streaming streets. 'Twill be a silent revolution, a revolution of the spirit, and the nobles will see their rule and every privilege snatched from them, and be powerless to resist. Then will be the day of the mob, and the haughtiest noble in the state will be counted as nobody, and stand lower than the merest mechanic stands now. This is what will happen unless the course of events can be stayed."

" And how," asked Corso eagerly, " do you propose to stay them ? "

" Giano della Bella must in the first place be crushed. As he turns from his own class—for he himself, as you know, is nobly born—then 'tis for his own class to rise and crush him who would work its undoing."

" Giano della Bella is beloved by the people, and the people are, after all, the more powerful force as regards numbers, at any rate," said Corso.

" As regards numbers only," was the reply.

There was a pause and then Corso bent forward and spoke in a low voice :

" Is it assassination that thou meanest ? " he asked. " Speak the word if so. For a righteous cause, even such acts may be condoned. What is one man's life that it should be weighed against the State ? "

" Assassination would be of no avail," replied della Tosa, with a slight tone of contempt. " Violent means would but serve to excite violence, and we should have a revolutionary mob around us at once."

" 'Tis true," said Corso thoughtfully ; " and yet, so long as della Bella leads the people, I see not how they are to be quelled."

Della Tosa bent forward until he was near enough to touch Corso.

" Are there no other weapons but the dagger or the knife ? " he asked. " Can you not see that a more deadly blow than one aimed at his body may be dealt to this upstart ? Let him alone for the nonce ; give him a free hand until he loses his head, intoxicated by his apparent success and popularity, and then —— "

" Then what ? " asked Corso eagerly.

" Then trap him," said della Tosa. " Catch him in a snare of his own making, and hold him up to the people who have followed him in such blind frenzy, as a traitorous noble who has lured them on to their own destruction. Turn their worship of him into hate—a mob is easily swayed—and the game is at once yours. Then, at the moment when they are without a leader, let a strong man be ready, a man with brains, and wealth, and power, and of a fine commanding appearance. Let the nobles follow him and triumph over the people, and who can tell to what height he may not rise ? The reaction will set in, and even the mob which cheered della Bella the day before will be suddenly dazzled and will stoop to lick the dust at the new leader's feet. The days of the Commonwealth grow near their end. The times are ripe for another form of rule, and now that Rimini, and Ravenna, and Ferrara have their courts, why should Florence be left behind ? The day will come for her, even as for them, to bow her proud head before the mighty hand of a despotic lord, and when it dawns, there is but one man

fitted by birth, by position, by natural endowments, to fill the post. Corso Donati, thou art he ! ”

Corso started to his feet. The vague dreams of a supreme and absolute power to which he had hitherto paid little heed, now sprang into sudden tangible shape before him. Through his brain passed a dazzling vision of himself lording it over the whole of Florence, a king in all but name, and he grew dizzy before the ambitious schemes which della Tosa's words thrust on his mind.

But suddenly a cloud passed across his countenance.

“ Mock me not, della Tosa,” he said bitterly ; “ such an aim as that thou holdest up before me, though it fits well with the ambitious dreams of my own soul, is, alas ! impossible of realization. Wealth is indispensable to attain even the preliminary measures for such a lofty position, and as you surely know, my house is much impoverished and I have difficulty in keeping up even the amount of display befitting its present rank. Had I but the means of my wife's family, the Cerchi, it would be a different tale, perchance, but money and blood go rarely together in Florence now. It is ever the way ; the man who has the advantages of birth and breeding lacks the means to use them, and the prizes of life fall where they are wasted.”

“ The fortunes of your house may improve,” said della Tosa. “ Your sons, for instance, are now of almost marriageable age.”

“ That avails naught,” said Corso gloomily ; “ for it is a wise saying that wealth meets wealth, and wealthy fathers look not to impoverished houses to find husbands for their daughters.”

“ And yet, since wealth is admitted to be an essential

to success, in an alliance between your house and one of wealth would seem to be your only chance," said Tosa musingly.

"Let us not then waste our breath in discussing the impossible," said Corso impatiently.

Della Tosa pushed his chair a little nearer to his companion.

"For the soul which would really succeed, that word exists not," he said. "If you have no hope of an advantageous marriage for your sons, there is still one other member of your house unwed. Your sister Piccarda's beauty should easily gain the wealthiest man in Florence as your brother-in-law, and thus strengthen your position both by money and influence. Was she not the toast of Florence during those but too brief years when she shone in our midst?"

Corso had started at the mention of his sister's name, and his brow contracted as with some painful memory.

"Taunt me not!" he cried angrily. "You know the whole story of my sister's obstinate refusal to wed, and her final escape by stealth from this house to enter the Convent of St. Clara."

"Convent doors have opened ere now to even cloistered nuns," said della Tosa quietly. "How else were Constance of Sicily an Empress and the mother of an Emperor?"

"How!" cried Corso in tones of horror. "Would you have me to stain my soul with the sin of sacrilege, and by force compel my sister to break her vows?"

"I would not only that," said della Tosa, "I would have you give her to me as wife. Five thousand golden florins do I promise to pay you on the day we are wed."

That would at least clear off some of the debts which are likely ere long to grow too troublesome to be ignored, and apart from that, the influence of the della Tosa house is sufficient to turn the scale either way when the day of your opportunity comes. Is it worth the price?"

"Is there no other way?" asked Corso gloomily, "for of a truth, della Tosa, the undertaking is one not to my taste. Piccarda was ever different from other maidens, and from childhood her thoughts were set on the convent life. I did my utmost to oppose this ere the final step was taken, but it is a different matter to tear her from the life she hath chosen and force her into a husband's arms."

"Tut, tut," said della Tosa, "what avail a few tears and screams from a woman in the carrying out of such designs as ours? The Lady Piccarda knew nothing of the world she so rashly renounced, and when once she hath tasted of its delights, she will live to thank you for the daring which saved her from the fate she had chosen. 'Twill indeed be doing her a kindness, little though she may recognise it at the time, and to my mind, the crime of leaving so precious a jewel hidden from the world were greater than that of forcing it into daylight."

"She liked you not," said Corso. "Had she not shown so strong a disinclination towards you in the beginning, my task had perhaps been easier."

Della Tosa's thin lips parted in a smile.

"You but excite in me a greater longing to win her," he replied. "I have loved her since the day now six years past when I first beheld her, and mark my words, Corso, she shall be my wife. If you have not the courage

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for the deed, I have, but then you will have proved yourself unfit, after all, for the career I would place before you, and the support of my money and influence will be given elsewhere. It seems but a small thing, this question of a woman's whim, but on it may hang the future of Florence—and of Corso Donati. Well, think it over for the moment," he continued, as Corso still remained silent, "but let me know ere long at what decision you arrive, for in truth my lover's impatience will brook no long delay. And now, farewell."

He rose as he spoke, and the next minute had left the Donati Palace.

Corso remained for a few minutes after della Tosa's departure, plunged in gloomy thoughts. Then, with a sudden movement as if to shake himself free from them, he also rose.

CHAPTER III

A WOMAN'S WILES

WHEN Corso left his house, he went with quick, hurried steps towards the Bargello, which was at that time the official residence of the Podestà, to which office of supreme magistrate a new man named Lucino da Como had recently been appointed. Contrary to the custom at this time, Lucino (a member, as was customary, of another Italian state) had brought his wife and family with him into residence,* and with his immediate circle he had also brought a lady famed for her beauty, who was a cousin of his wife's and the widowed daughter of the renowned Ghibelline ruler, Uguccione della Faggiuola, of Lucca. It was to an appointment with this lady that Corso hastened, eager for the moment to let pleasure and the sight of her face obliterate political problems from his mind.

On arriving at the Bargello, he dismissed the armed attendants, without which it were not safe for a man of his importance to walk forth after nightfall, telling them to return in a given time, and, after a few words of explanation to the retainer at the doorway, he was conducted rapidly to an apartment at the end of a long

* As Dino Compagni mentions that Lucino was accompanied by his wife when he escaped from the Bargello during his term of office, apparently an exception was made in this instance to the rule of the Podestà being unaccompanied by his family.

passage, the door of which was thrown open to him. The room was brilliantly lighted with many wax candles, and from an elegant divan on which she half reclined, there slowly rose to greet him a woman of remarkable appearance.

Lucia da Castra, the daughter of Ugucione, possessed the type of beauty which was more characteristic of the latter period of the Renaissance than of her own time. Her shapely head was crowned with thick masses of dusky hair, which took too many shades to be correctly described as black. It fell back in rippling waves from a low, broad brow. The eyebrows were straight, not arched, and the dark, lustrous eyes somewhat deep-set under long, sweeping eyelashes. The nose was straight and well-formed, and the complexion of that clear, creamy white which is generally a sign of good, physical health. Perhaps the most striking feature, however, in Lucia's face, was the mouth, with its almost scarlet lips, whose full but firm outline denoted the unusual combination of strong sensuality and great self-control. The well-moulded chin accentuated this latter characteristic. The neck was very shapely, and rose in exquisite curves above the sloping shoulders and the well-developed bust.

When she rose, she was seen to be above the medium height, and her action in walking had a gliding, swaying movement which added to the subtle fascination of her appearance. She was clothed in long, trailing, crimson draperies.

"Welcome, welcome, Messer Corso," she said, extending a hand which, though beautifully shaped, had the long, firm fingers which often denote cruelty. "So you have obeyed my behest?"

"Were it likely I should fail to do so?" said Corso, raising her hand to his lips. "Ah! Donna Lucia, the time has seemed long to me since I saw you last."

"'Tis but three years," she replied. "Yet much hath happened since then. You were the Podestà of Pistoia, and I, the wife of da Castra." Her bosom heaved with a sigh and her eyes were cast down.

"I heard of your loss," said Corso, feasting his eyes on her beauty. "Da Castra fell as a brave man should, in the midst of the battle, on the field of Campaldino. Peace be to his soul!"

"Yea, peace to his soul. He was a gallant gentleman. But I never loved him, Corso."

With an air of timid appeal she turned her lustrous eyes under their sweeping lashes upon him. "Am I very heartless, think you?" she whispered.

"You are one of those meant to win love whether you return it or not," he answered. "You are to be worshipped and adored for your beauty; that is all men ask of you."

"But that is not enough for me," she said quickly. "I care not for admiration unless it come from one I could love in return. I would give, as well as take, but da Castra could never touch my heart. He was not the man I could ever have loved even had I not met another——" she paused then, and continued as if lost in thoughts which she half unconsciously spoke aloud—"the man I could love must be not only brave—so many men are that—he must be strong and handsome, and, above all, born to rule. He must be a king among men as well as a king to me."

"Where have you found such a man?" asked Corso,

fixing his ardent gaze upon her. "Does such a one indeed exist?"

He approached so near to her that the breath through his parted lips was hot upon her cheek. Her eyes rose slowly and as though against her will, and met his glowing with passion.

"Ah! you have guessed my secret," she whispered, and the next moment she was in his arms.

But almost before Corso's first burning kiss fell on her lips, she wrenched herself from him.

"Come no nearer," she cried, moving from him. "Ah! I forgot. For one wild moment I forgot that though I am free, you are not. Corso, you must leave me."

"Lucia!" he cried, "I cannot. Have I not loved you ever since we met at Pistoia? Did I not love you even before, when you were under your father's roof? Who could see your beauty and not fall at your feet, even though you did not return his devotion? But you do love me. What man blessed with so sweet a draught in his hand, could refrain from draining it? Lucia, you have awoke a passion which only before slumbered. You shall be mine, if I die and go to hell the next minute."

"Stay!" she cried, rising. "Come one step nearer, and I summon assistance. Have you forgotten Donna Agnese?"

"How could I remember any woman but you in your presence?" he said, and in truth he had no thought at the moment, for the homely but virtuous wife who had borne him his sons and loved him with a tender affection, though there had been a time when he loved her well.

"But you must remember," she said, still holding her own feelings in check, but doing so with a deep, sinister

motive which did not appear. For though Corso had actually aroused in her all the passion of which she was capable, ambition was an even stronger force in her than love, and it was not to be the mistress, but the wife, of the man in whom she saw the destined ruler of Florence, that Lucia aspired. An insuperable obstacle, it might seem, existed in the person of Donna Agnese, but to the mediæval mind such an obstacle was not always insuperable, though in the thirteenth century the dagger or the cup had to do the work which, in the twentieth century, is accomplished in a lengthier and less simple way by the Divorce Court. And now, having roused the passion of Corso, having, as she knew, made him the weak and yielding tool of her beauty, Lucia felt that half of her object had been accomplished, that the next step was to keep that passion inflamed, but unsatisfied, while after that would remain a further and more important course which at present she did not pause to examine in detail. She had determined, before she came to Florence, to be the wife of the man who had aroused her passion three years before, when her own husband lived, and she was confident that she should ultimately attain her object.

"You must remember, we must both remember, that you are married," she said sadly.

"Married or not, you alone possess my heart and my soul," he replied.

"I will be your queen and your star, if I may," she said softly. "The poets ever worship some woman with an ideal love that seeks no earthly fulfilment. If I could dream I might be such a star to you, Corso, I might even yet be happy, though I must keep my own love a secret in my heart."

"I am not a poet," said Corso, "and crave a more human return from the woman I adore."

"Hush! Corso, your words but insult me. Do not dream that Lucia da Castra will ever take more than the ideal love she describes save from one who can call her wife."

"Were I but free," he murmured, "what might not you and I accomplish together?"

"But you are not free, dear friend," she said, touching his hand with a gentle, caressing movement. "But enough of love," she added hastily, "I asked you here to discuss quite different topics. How go your political schemes? Surely you will ere long rise to the place that you were born to occupy as the foremost leader in Florence."

"As you must soon hear, things go ill," he said. "The power of the people increases daily, led as they are by that false traitor to his own party, della Bella. They worship him. They hate me."

"But that matters not," she said. "You do not want the love of the people, Corso. You want their fear. You want to tread the low-born rabble under an iron heel, to crush them as the grapes are crushed for the vintage and make yourself drunk with the red streams that flow from them. You will rise, you must rise to be the ruler of Florence, and one of the most important men in Italy. You have the genius and the power to do it."

"Genius and power avail me not without money," he replied.

"You must not fail for want of that base means to success," she cried. "I have wealth. Gladly would I pour it out for you."

"No, no," he cried, "I can take no aid from a woman."

"You must seek wealthy alliances for your family," she said. "Had you not a sister who was unwed?"

Corso started, and della Tosa's evil suggestion, which he had put from his mind, returned to him. As he had walked to the Bargello, he had vowed that he would think no more of it, and that for no amount of money would he burden his conscience with the sin of forcing his gentle sister from the Convent. But now, that resolve was forgotten, and suddenly the deed seemed less dark as he told Lucia of what was proposed and she listened with parted lips and eyes bright with approval. At the end, a low laugh fell from her lips.

"Forgive my mirth," she said, "but the thought of della Tosa married to a nun strikes me indeed as amusing. But in truth, Corso, I think the plan an excellent one. He is just the man for one who is shrinking and timid, and he will soon make her forget the nonsense of the Convent. Poor child! How little she knows what she hath renounced; she would live to thank you, Corso, for bringing her back to the world of whose delights she knows nothing."

"So said della Tosa," said Corso musingly.

"It were an excellent alliance for you," she continued eagerly. "The della Tosas' friendship as well as their money will be of the utmost value. In truth, I should not lose such a chance, Corso."

"My sister hath set her affection on the cloistered life," he said. "It is no light matter to wrench her from it."

"It may seem so to her now," said Lucia, "but this wayward fancy will pass, and what are a maiden's

whims compared with the affairs of state? The nun is a small sacrifice for a great cause.

" 'Tis true her marriage would help me much just now," he mused, "and the goal I have in view is no small one."

" 'Tis no small one, and more than that, it is your destiny. And now, dear friend, you must leave me, or tongues will wag, and a woman's fair name is too precious to risk. Farewell, Corso, and let me help thee when I can."

He raised her hand to his lips and this time kissed it passionately.

"Ah, Corso," she cried, bending towards him, "our fate is a cruel one, but let me see thee again soon. To meet sometimes is the sole comfort remaining to us. Perhaps it is wrong, but I cannot deny myself this. And now leave me."

She tore herself from him, and Corso hurried from the room with the air of a man dazed.

The evening had been one of the most critical in his life, but as a matter of fact, several weeks were to elapse before he again met the woman who was to be the evil star of his life.

CHAPTER IV

LEONORA

THAT same evening, when young Filippo Donati slipped away from the assembly of merry-makers at his father's house, he hastened outside, and passing down the street, now called the Via Condotta in which the Donati Palace was situated, he took a turning to the south which led him at once into the great Piazza or central square of Florence. The Palazzo Pubblico, whose massive proportions now give an air of gloomy mediæval grandeur to this space, was not then begun, but on its future site stood the houses of the Foraboscini family, with the tower called the Vacca (or cow) which was afterwards to form an integral portion of the structure which replaced them. Passing them, and leaving also behind him the great palace of the Cerchi, his mother's family, which flanked the square to the north and faced his own house on the other side, Filippo next turned in an easterly direction, and came to a house of large proportions, but unpretentious style, where he was a frequent and welcome guest. Little did Corso Donati imagine, as he and della Tosa calmly schemed how to bring about the downfall of della Bella, "the Friend of the People," that his own son was at that very hour seated in happy familiarity in the household of the very man against whom they plotted.

In earlier days an acquaintance had existed between

the two families, who were neighbours and belonged by origin to the same class—that of the nobles; but since Corso's return to Florence after an absence of two years, during which he had held the office of Podestà first in Bologna and then in Pistoia, the friendly relations between the heads of the two households had been discontinued. Della Bella had meanwhile developed the strong, democratic sympathies which had caused him to cast off the traditions of his class, and friendship was no longer possible between himself and Corso Donati, the proud, implacable noble whose cherished ambitions were to further crush the people and establish a patrician government.

But with Filippo, matters were very different. His own serious, earnest nature had led him from boyhood to face the problem of politics from the side of the people as well as from that of the nobles, and in the ardent dreams of reform which animated the impassioned soul of della Bella there was much which appealed to him. After the battle of Campaldino in 1289, at which he had served as a stripling, he had returned to Florence, thus preceding by several months his father, whose term of office at Pistoia had not expired at the time, and during that period he had dropped into very friendly relations with della Bella and was frequently at his house. But on Corso's return, his strongly expressed enmity to the popular leader caused the young man to keep his intimacy a secret, lest Corso should forbid his intercourse entirely.

Meanwhile, a stronger feeling than either the taste for politics or the friendship of della Bella himself, attracted Filippo to the house. Della Bella's only daughter, Leonora, was of about the same age as Filippo, and,

during his frequent visits, the friendship with which the two young people had at first met had rapidly grown into a warmer feeling. Their secret was known to della Bella, who had himself taken a great liking to Filippo and was willing for their marriage to take place as soon as circumstances would permit. But in the present unsettled state of things, it was seen by all that it would be unwise to risk Corso's displeasure and opposition by any formal betrothal. Meanwhile, the young people resigned themselves to waiting with a hopefulness characteristic of youth, but with a patience rare to it. None could tell what the next year or two might bring forth, and if the cause of della Bella triumphed and he himself became one of the most prominent personages in the state, a marriage between his daughter and Corso Donati's son might assume a very different aspect in the eyes of the latter, from the one it would do now. Should this not be so, Filippo would be of age the following year and would be in a better position to run the risk of forfeiting his father's favour.

Leonora della Bella was sitting alone at her embroidery frame when Filippo entered the family apartment, and with a glad cry she rose to meet him.

"Oh! Filippo, I am so glad, so very glad you have come," she said with simple and unconcealed delight as she stretched out her hands in eager welcome.

Filippo gazed tenderly at the face turned to his, which in truth even to other than a lover's eye was possessed of singular attraction.

Perhaps beauty, in the strict sense of the word, could hardly be claimed for Leonora, but there was something in her appearance more arresting than mere beauty. Young

though she was, strength of purpose and nobility of character had already stamped their impress on her countenance, intense feeling had even in the short space of twenty years graven on it lines which were the outward indication of spiritual development. Her features were irregular, and unremarkable in themselves, but in her eye shone the light of a brave and earnest spirit, and on her lips hovered a pathetic smile which had in it more of tragedy than of mirth, and spoke rather of sorrow faced and overcome, of steadfast purpose and brave endeavour, than of happiness. And yet no one could look on Leonora and think her unhappy. The spirit whose radiant reflection gave her countenance its greatest charm was too brave, too hopeful, too instinct with a noble faith in the ultimate good of the divine purpose, not to dispel any such impression.

Though Leonora had early learnt the lessons that suffering faced and overcome alone can teach, her life had been outwardly calm and uneventful, and the experiences which had moulded her character had been principally the reflection of those outer events which had profoundly stirred and touched her.

The struggle for the divine gift of liberty, which was surging around her, the cries of the oppressed and down-trodden people, the woes of Florence torn into factions of mutual hatred and intolerance, had early entered into her very soul.

Her father's enthusiastic patriotism and espousal of the people's cause had further kindled and developed this, and, as his constant companion, she had imbibed those same principles of freedom and justice for which he was prepared to sacrifice wealth, fame, and life itself.

Well might Leonora's countenance, even with her lover by her side, have a hint of hidden tragedy, for to the woman whose soul is given to a public cause, the private happiness of the individual can rarely befall.

And now, as Filippo feasted his eyes on the face which contained for him all the joy of his life, he noticed an expression slightly sadder than usual upon it, a cloud which his observant eye had not beheld there when last he saw her.

"Dearest," he said, leading her to a seat, "has aught chanced to trouble thee? Surely, there is sadness in thy face, which even I do not seem able to dispel. What is it, dear one?"

Leonora turned her expressive eyes to him, and one of her pathetic smiles trembled on her lips.

"It is naught fresh, dear Filippo," she said. "But my father is away at a council meeting, and I was alone and fell to thinking."

And the thoughts were sad ones, was it not so?" he asked tenderly. "Come, Leonora, does not our love give me a right to know what troubles thee?"

"It is the woes of the people," she cried, pressing her hand on her bosom. "Their cry is ever in my ears. Why must they be oppressed and down-trodden because they are born to poverty? Surely their poverty entitles them to more consideration, not less. They grow desperate, Filippo, one can see it in their eyes and on their sullen brows. The women have taken up the cause, and when the men flag they urge them on with reminders of their wrongs. God grant that matters may be stopped, or worse evils will befall. The people will rise against the nobles, and the horrors of civil war

fill Florence once more with lamentation. They are like children, when once excited, like poor, misguided children, and will but work their own undoing, if left without a leader."

"And was it this alone that troubled thee?" asked Filippo.

"This alone!" replied Leonora; "oh! Filippo, is it not enough? But yet," she added after a brief pause, "to be truthful, it was not only the woes of the people which weighed heavily on me to-night. Other thoughts of a more personal nature followed, dear Filippo; hast thou ever thought that if this contest come, as much I fear me it is bound to do, thy father and mine must be open enemies?"

"Yes," said Filippo gravely, "I have thought of that. My father, as thou knowest well, is patrician to the core. He means not to be cruel, he is far too brave and honourable to be knowingly unjust, but the cause of the people is powerless to appeal to him, because he cannot and will not allow himself to see their point of view. To him it seems an obvious fact that those born to power and riches are born to rule. To allow otherwise, would be to him a reversal of the very order of things."

"Cannot you show him that if the nobles have their rights and privileges, at least the people have theirs too," she pleaded. "Indeed, I think if he could once enter into what they feel and suffer, his heart must surely ache for them. But a few days since, a woman came here to my father with distracted mien and dishevelled hair. 'My son is slain!' she wailed. 'My only son! Vengeance and redress is all I ask.'

"It turned out that her son was in the way when the

haughty Argenti was riding down the street. He called to him to move, and as he did not do so with sufficient speed, Argenti struck him down and called to his servants to administer punishment. They did with so much good-will that the poor fellow died of his injuries."

"What did your father?" asked Filippo with flashing eye. "Was he able to procure an adequate penalty for such a scandalous outrage?"

"He brought the case before the Podestà," said the girl, "but Argenti, as thou knowest, is very rich and influential. It was decreed that in the first place it was the young man's fault for being in the way, and that he deserved to be run down; in the second, that the fact of his dying from the effects of his thrashing was a pure accident, and to punish for an accident were a sin. Argenti was let off without even a fine. And yet," she went on with increasing fervour, "a poor young fellow, a cooper from the other side of the Arno, was brought up the other day for having struck a nobleman's lacquay in a street brawl over a girl, and in punishment had his nose and ears slit, and his right hand chopped off, though the other man was not at all seriously injured. Is it any wonder that the people smart under a burning sense of injustice?"

"Alas! no," replied Filippo, "and yet, what is to be done?"

"Something, at any rate, as long as my father has it in his power to act," she said. "Were there but a few more men like him in Florence, it might soon be purged of its terrible evils. It is but little that one single-handed, can accomplish, yet he will fight for the people with his latest breath. He loves them, Filippo, as if

they were his own flesh and blood. He would fain be a father to them and establish them all in happiness and peace. Oh ! would that I were a man that I might help him in this work, that I might fight inch by inch for liberty and justice. Alas ! I am but a weak woman, I can do naught but suffer."

The rare tears stood in her eyes as she ceased speaking, and Filippo hastened to comfort her with all a lover's tenderness.

" You do more to help than you can imagine," he said earnestly. " You are the great comfort and inspiration of della Bella's life. He told me so himself."

A glad light sprang into the girl's eyes. " Did he in truth say that ? " she cried joyfully. " Yet all the same," she added, " I wish I were a man and could bear my share in the active strife."

" There is little I can do, man though I be," said Filippo, sadly ; for he thought to hear a whispered reproach in her words. " I am too much trammelled by the name I bear."

" Yes," she said, " it would be worse than useless for you to take an open part as yet. Wait thy time, Filippo. Good men are too scarce for the great God not to give opportunities for their use, and your day will come, never fear."

The interview, so far, between these young lovers had been singularly different from the usual love-making of the day ; but indeed their attitude to each other had in it something very exceptional, and the personal passion of each was not only rooted in a sense of friendship, very rare between thirteenth-century lovers, but was apt to be merged in the other impersonal passion which stirred

and animated their souls. The purely sensual aspect of love had little attraction for Leonora della Bella's lofty nature, and the steadfast purpose of her life would have rendered her indifferent to, or contemptuous of, the silly conceits and elaborate compliments which lovers of that day were wont to present to the ladies of their affection. And Filippo, recognising and respecting this in her, not only loved her with all the depth and intensity of a man's passion, but gave her also, in return, a venerating tenderness, and a response from all the higher and more spiritual side of himself.

And here, in order thoroughly to understand Leonora's character, it may be mentioned that her upbringing had differed considerably from the usual one of an Italian lady of the day. Her father's freedom from ordinary conventional ideas had been displayed in his treatment of her, and she had been accorded a liberty not usually allowed even to married women. Since her mother's death, while she herself was but in budding girlhood, della Bella had placed her at the head of his household and made her his constant companion, a position for which her clear brain and strong, steadfast character rendered her peculiarly fitted. He told her all his political schemes, and found in her ready sympathy a constant comfort and inspiration. Thus, instead of spending her life apart in the women's quarter of the house, as was the custom with other Italian ladies of her day, she mingled freely with her father's guests when they came to the house, and grew up free from any sex-consciousness, though ever having an inherent dignity of demeanour which would have caused the man who sought to take a liberty with her to be bold indeed.

And now, ere time for tender passages between the lovers had occurred, the door opened, and with a cry of welcome Leonora sprang forward to greet her father.

"How went the meeting?" she asked with eager interest. "Oh! it was successful, I am sure, from thy expression," she added, gazing at him fondly, as, after turning to greet Filippo, he seated himself between them.

The face which della Bella now turned from one to the other, was indeed expressive of satisfaction and joy.

"Yes," he answered with a bright smile, "thou mayst rejoice with me, little daughter. There is no doubt that the Commission will be appointed to revise the laws. We shall have a revival of the Court known as the *Ordini d'Arbitrato*, and who can doubt that a complete revision of the statutes will ensue. Then we may hope to see the present iniquitous state of things abolished, and justice established in our midst at last."

As he turned to his daughter, the likeness between them was strikingly apparent, but Giano's face had neither the haunting tragedy, nor the latent strength, of Leonora's. The broad, overhanging brow was common to each, but in Giano's eager, restless eye there dwelt the spirit of the enthusiast without the balancing power of the steadfast judgment which the lower part of Leonora's face displayed. His lips were somewhat fuller than hers, his chin rather more pointed, the jaw less fully developed. But the eager alertness of the man was, after all, his most marked characteristic. His rapid change of expression, his tightly controlled muscles, his capable, nervous hands, all betokened one of those intensely alive personalities whose magnetism seems to exude from every fibre of their being. He was, in

fact, one of those in the contemplation of whom criticism is apt to disappear before the overmastering force of a strong, personal fascination. The gravest errors of such men often excite no more blame than the small faults of others. Even their crimes are condoned, and what would be another man's failure becomes their success. Giano's faults were, however, as will later be seen, those of a rash impetuosity, a too hasty judgment, a failure to see beyond the immediate consequences of an action, rather than any deeper defects of character. No trace of cowardice, either physical or mental, was, at any rate, among his faults. His ardent nature was too entirely devoted to the cause he had taken up to care either for his own personal safety, or for the opinions of other people. The mistakes by which he damaged his cause arose not from self-interest, as some historians have tried to prove, but from too much daring and zeal on behalf of others. He was too often apt to be blinded by his own enthusiasm, and this caused a failure to see the other side which later led to much harm. And yet, through all his faults, Giano della Bella's name stands out as a luminous example of earnest chivalry and exalted disinterestedness against the dark background of political corruption and intrigue of his time.

"Yes," he continued, "the dawn begins to break. At last the oppression by which the people are trodden into the dust may cease, and a happier era for Florence be upon us. Laws to protect them exist indeed; they were fought for by our ancestors in the days of old, and written in their blood, but of what avail are they, for who heeds them now? Revolutions have effaced their record, and warfare buried them beneath its ruins. But

now we shall restore them. Once more," he added with increasing fervour, "shall Florence rise from her degradation and woe, and take her place as a glorious commonwealth, standing free to the heavens, based on the noblest of foundations, that of justice to all."

"And the nobles?" said Filippo quietly. "What effect will your new laws have on them?"

Della Bella paused for a moment before replying, as the recollection that he was addressing the son of Corso Donati occurred to him, but his affectionate confidence in the young man was great, and moreover, motives of prudence or caution had seldom a restraining influence over him.

"They have ruled too badly to have consideration," he said; "the rights that they have abused shall be taken from them. Let the people have their turn now, and the honest tradesman, the stout-hearted artizan, stand in the place of the haughty aristocrat and the vicious noble."

"It is but fair to tell thee this," he continued, placing an affectionate hand on the young man's shoulder. "Much I fear that for thee there are troublous times ahead, and even now, if thy father knew of thy visits here, he might turn thee out of his house. Is this not so?"

"I shall be of age next year," replied the young man quickly. "When that time comes it would matter not if I were turned out of my home. The world lies before me. I can make my own way. But there is one thing that restrains me indeed from openly throwing in my lot with yours now, for the cause at your heart is as dear to my own. 'Tis not the thought of my father's wrath, in truth, that holds me back, but of my mother's tears."

"Ah!" said della Bella thoughtfully, "it would be no doubt a bitter blow to Donna Agnese were you to be driven from your father's house, and the cause of the people is no doubt as hateful to her as to Messer Corso himself."

"My mother has too tender a heart not to sympathise with the people's woe, if it were once brought before her," replied Filippo. "Moreover, she is herself by birth, as thou knowest, one of the Cerchi, who belong by origin to the popolani grassi, and are, as you are so well aware, much inclined to take up their cause, in spite of all the display by which they lord it among the nobles themselves. But my mother loves me with a tender devotion. It would be a terrible blow to her were ought to occur which might divide us. For her sake I must wait before I commit myself to any decided line of action. Who knows," he added, with the eager hopefulness of youth, "how things may shape themselves during the next year or two?"

"But meanwhile, were it not best to be warned in time and leave us until these troublous times are past?" said della Bella, kindly.

"Yes, Filippo," here joined in Leonora. "It were, as my father says, best for thee to come here no more until the times have changed. Incur no danger to thyself for our sakes, I entreat thee."

"You would in truth bid me leave you?" asked Filippo, gazing from one to the other.

"Yes," was the reply from either lips.

"It is indeed best," said della Bella. "Your visits here cannot fail to be a source of peril. In happier times, who knows, as you say, what may chance?"

"And I am to leave you, my best and noblest friends, because danger threatens me?" cried Filippo. "I am to forsake you whom I so dearly love when peril draws nigh. Nay, your suggestion but proves once more the nobility of your souls, but let me at least show myself worthy of your friendship and love by remaining."

A wave of joy and relief passed rapidly over Leonora's countenance.

"I fear I am selfish to rejoice," she said, with a glad sigh, "but in truth I cannot help doing so, for though my heart told me that you would never leave us, I dared not listen to it."

"Listen ever to that voice," whispered Filippo, "for only some most cruel fate shall ever force us to part."

But on neither could there dawn presage of the terrible course of events which was ere long to realise those words, and seem to tear them asunder for ever.

"And now, dear father," cried Leonora, turning to della Bella, "what of the meeting to-night? How went it, and who were present?"

"Thy uncle, Vieri dei Cerchi, for one," said della Bella, turning to Filippo. "A fine man and an honest, though, craving your pardon, somewhat slow of speech, and not altogether undeserving of the ridicule with which it is said thy father treats him."

"In truth, to one of my father's brilliance and ready wit, my uncle's heavy manner is somewhat annoying," replied Filippo; "and I fear me that his jesting remark: 'Hath the ass brayed to-day?' in allusion to Vieri's speeches, hath been adopted by his enemies and become a byword among them. Yet, methinks that, nevertheless, my father rightly values the honest heart and sterling

merit which lie underneath our kinsman's awkward manner."

"Young Dino Compagni was also present," continued della Bella. "A rising young fellow is he, and no less ready with his pen than with his tongue, and there, too, was Pecora of the Butcher's Guild, a rough but determined soul, and full of praiseworthy eagerness, though, to the minds of some, too violent at times in his expression of it. Several noteworthy speeches were made, but the honours of the evening fell to a young man who hath lately joined the Guild of Apothecaries. Truly, a noble and stirring speech did he make. Vieri had blundered and spluttered for half an hour, and then Pecora thundered and howled, denouncing much that was meet to be denounced, but still somewhat confusing his hearers by his incoherencies, when up sprang a tall, grave fellow with long, straight features, a burning eye under a lofty brow, and a strangely melancholy mouth. The meeting had grown somewhat uproarious by now, but at sight of his curious still figure somehow everyone grew quiet, and one and another I saw nudge their neighbours and bid them listen. Some seemed half inclined to laugh, for he is the same youngster who made himself ridiculous some two years back by his lovesick airs for a mysterious lady, whose early death, so I am told, he deplored in his verse. Howbeit, laughter was silenced the moment he began to speak, and, in sooth, such a torrent of burning eloquence, of fervent enthusiasm for Florence, of scathing invective against her oppressors, it hath not often been my lot to hear. Then, of a sudden, he sat down, and for a moment the intense silence remained unbroken until it gave way to a deafening outburst of cheers. But

through it all, he remained as though he heard it not ; his stern, earnest face moved no muscle, his burning eye was as though fixed on some vision far away. But when, as the meeting dispersed, men pressed round him on every side, to offer congratulations, he seemed with a sudden start to come back to his surroundings, and, rising in haste, he strode through their midst with his cloak closely wrapt round him, and disappeared in the open. Well, he will make his mark in Florence if I mistake not, when he doth leave his mooning and love-making, and devotes himself to the practical side of affairs. But, by the way, Filippo, thou dost surely know the man, since he is, I understand, a friend of your uncle Forese, and of other poetasters who frequent your house, and has himself, I am told, quite a pretty turn that way ? 'Tis Dante, the son of Alighieri, of whom I speak."

"In truth I know him a little and like him much," replied Filippo ; "he and my Uncle Forese are boon companions when the latter is not in his cups, and for that failing of loving good cheer too well, Dante, though so much his junior, hath in my hearing, admonished him severely. A sworn friend is he, too, of Guido Cavalcanti, and though the latter and my father love not each other over much, intercourse is still kept up between our houses, and at the elder Cavalcanti's have I met him. He and Guido versify together, a pursuit not much to my own taste, I confess, but apart from that Dante has a common sense and good understanding rare in a poet. It was said at my father's table only to-night that he might soon rise to be one of the Priors of Florence."

"That he well may," replied della Bella. "But now,

enough of him. Is it not time that thou shouldst return, if thou wouldst not cause suspicion by thy absence ? "

Filippo, thus reminded of the lateness of the hour, admitted that by staying longer he ran the risk of finding the great gates of the Donati Palace closed for the night, and reluctantly tore himself away.

CHAPTER V

PICCARDA

ON the outskirts of Florence, on the opposite side of the Arno from the Donati Palace, was a peaceful spot, which offered a strange contrast to the stormy scenes and surging passions which raged so near. Thither, to the sacred shelter of the Carmine Convent, dedicated to St. Clara, had fled the beautiful Piccarda, younger sister of Corso Donati, eager to escape from a world in which she found little congenial to her gentle spirit, and joyful to devote herself to the life of holy prayer and service in which her happiness lay.

One afternoon about a week after the one on which she had formed the subject of the dark conversation between her brother and della Tosa, Piccarda had been engaged in sorting dried herbs from the convent garden, and this task fulfilled, she bore them into the room in the convent where such simple medicaments as the nuns could supply were prepared, and placed them in careful order there.

As she moved about the room in fulfilment of her task, a holy contentment seemed to emanate from the person of the nun, and now and again she would pause, and from

pure gladness of heart chant softly to herself some sweet and solemn strain from the Church's offices.

So absorbed was she in her occupation that the door behind her had opened, admitting a lady of advanced years, without her perceiving it.

Unlike Piccarda, who, as an admitted nun, wore a nun's garb, she who now approached her was clad in a dress which, though plain even to austerity, was of secular design, and her face, instead of being partially hidden by the bands and wimple of a nun, was fully exposed, revealing, in spite of her years, traces of a beauty which had once been renowned through Italy.

"Ah! Sister Constance," she said, addressing Piccarda by the name she had adopted on becoming a nun; "busy as usual, and, to judge by your expression, no less happy than busy."

"In truth," replied the nun, turning to her with a smile of peculiar sweetness, "I am always happy. Have I not every cause to be so?"

The elder woman sighed as she looked at her, and for a moment made no reply. Though she had sought the convent in penitence for her own wild past, echoes from that gay and brilliant court-life still clung tenaciously to her memory, and gazing at the face before her, from which even the nun's wimple and veil could not entirely conceal the striking beauty, she marvelled that one for whom the world must surely have held so many attractions, should so early find happiness and contentment in the cloister. It was indeed difficult for one so totally dissimilar in temperament rightly to understand the mystic spiritual nature of Piccarda, and yet, perhaps, it was this very divergence which had already drawn

the nun near to her, and had struck chords of tender affection on the heart whose misdirected and uncontrolled passion had been her ruin.

Moved by a sudden impulse, Piccarda now ceased from her work and flung herself on the ground by the other's side.

"Dear Lady Cunizza," she said tenderly, "you seem lost in thought. Are some sad memories assailing you?"

Cunizza recovered herself with a start.

"Sad memories are ever mine," she said; "but for the moment," she added, fixing on Piccarda the dark eyes in which age had not yet dimmed the fires, "I was pondering less on my own past, than on your future."

"My future!" said Piccarda with a happy laugh; "there were not much food for reflection in the simple destiny of a nun."

"That is just it," replied Cunizza. For a moment she paused, reluctant to cloud the radiant saintliness of Piccarda by the suggestion of aught outside it, but in truth her eagerness to know the nun's answer to her question was great, and she soon continued.

"Is it possible," she asked, "that you, in all the fulness of your youth and beauty, are really contented here? Do you never know longings, however suppressed, to enter the world again, to take your place in the house of your fathers—to wed?"

"Indeed, no," replied Piccarda raising clear, candid eyes in which shone the light of a holy rapture, to Cunizza's face. "I was miserable in my brother's house when I was forced to take part in gaieties for which I had no taste. Moreover, the constant dissensions,

the atmosphere of political strife, were terrible to me. My soul pined for that peace which the convent alone can give. I thirsted for the heavenly banquet of prayer and song which was denied to me so often there. And as for being wed, the very thought was horrible. How should I bear an earthly bridegroom to come near, when my soul is already wedded to a heavenly ? "

" You know nothing of the world in reality," said Cunizza. " Even when in its midst you wrapt yourself, as it were, in a veil which hid it from you. The joy of human love which you renounce so lightly is one that you do not even imagine."

" It can never be so great as the joy that I do know," said Piccarda, with the light of fervour in her eyes. " Already in dreams I taste the heavenly banquet, I hear the holy songs of the angels, and see the vision of my glorified Saviour. What earthly joys can come near to that ? But last night the holy Clara herself drew near me as I lay on my couch, accompanied by a host of maidens who, like myself, had dedicated their bodies to our Lord.

" They sang sweet hymns such as no mortal lips could utter. They held fragrant blossoms to me culled from the very garden of Paradise. I rose this morning with my soul warmed by these glorious recollections. Who knows what one day our Gracious Lady herself may condescend to appear to me, even to me, the youngest nun in the convent ? And can you ask if I regret what I have renounced, when I have such joys as these in its place ? "

The tears rose to Cunizza's eyes. The innocent purity of the nun touched her soul, heavy with its own burden of sin.

"It is well for you to dwell apart," she said softly, "the world has no place for such as you; and yet, who knows but that your influence is wasted within these walls? Had I, for instance, in my own tempestuous youth, known one such a woman as you, had loved one so pure and innocent of evil, my life had perchance been very different. I might, who knows? have had strength to resist when wild waves of passion thrilled me with rapture, have been enabled to close my ears to the enticing music of a poet's fervour, or of a prince's adoration, and have been a good woman—instead of what I am."

"But you are good," said Piccarda, on whose pure soul the story of Cunizza's past had made little impression. "Are you not ever doing some noble works of charity to the sick and poor? Is it not well known how, on the death of your brothers, the lords of Romagna, you freed all their slaves, though you and your house were already much impoverished at the time? You are good, dear lady! I am sure you are!"

"Remain in that belief, sweet Sister Constance," said Cunizza. "If you can have faith in my virtue, I think I cannot be wholly bad, and your trust may help me even yet towards the attainment of what I have lost. Did not even the sinners draw near our Lord, and may there not then be hope of redemption for such as I?"

But Sister Constance, gazing at her with gentle eyes of innocent love and trust, read little of those dark passages in her past at which Cunizza dimly hinted, but saw her, as she saw life itself, through the shining atmosphere of her own excessive purity.

And meanwhile, the hour drew near when her own sweet dreams of mystic communion with saints and

angels were to be broken in upon with rude violence,
and that life of the outside world from which she thought
ever to have retired was to be forced with wicked cruelty
on her gentle soul once more.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE DONATI HOUSEHOLD

THAT same afternoon, Corso Donati strode into the apartment belonging to his wife Agnese, where, at the moment, she was seated with her two sons, Filippo and Simone.

A dark cloud rested on his brow and marred the beauty of his handsome countenance, and Agnese secretly trembled at those outer signs of her lord's ill-humour.

Too often, indeed, did Corso vent his temper on his inoffensive partner, whose slow ways and awkward manner were a constant source of irritation to him. A sister, as has been said, of Vieri dei Cerchi, and thus of plebeian origin, Agnese had none of the grace or dignity of one nobly born, while the small pretensions she had once had to comeliness had long since disappeared, and with them had vanished also the slight hold she had over her husband's affection. Yet beneath her unattractive appearance poor Donna Agnese concealed a warm and affectionate heart, which was sorely wounded by the neglect of the man who, in spite of all his failings, she fondly loved. One comfort, however, she retained, in the affection of her two sons, for not only Filippo, but his younger brother, the hot-headed, brilliant-brained Simone, was devoted to his mother.

"Prepare the guest chamber," said Corso roughly, as he seated himself. "I expect a visitor to-night."

"To-night!" said Agnese in surprise. "The time for preparation is short, but ——"

"Nonsense," he said angrily, "there is ample time for all but laggards."

"I will do my best to have all ready," said Agnese meekly. "At what hour will the guest be here?"

"Some time ere dawn, I hope," he replied. "It may be midnight or later. Have all ready in good time, and keep some of the women up. She may be fatigued and require attention."

"A lady, and arriving thus late!" said Agnese. "Comes she from far?"

"Nay, not from far," he replied, "yet her journey may, nevertheless, have fatigued her."

"Father," said Filippo eagerly, "it will be late for a lady to ride abroad. Cannot Simone and I go forth to meet her with a handful of retainers, and escort her hither?"

"Yea, father," cried Simone, to whose budding manhood the idea strongly appealed; "it were surely well that we should thus show honour to the lady who is to be our guest."

"The lady will be well attended," said Corso gloomily; "an armed force will be with her, and she requires no further escort."

As is not infrequently the case with those who perpetrate a crime, he shrank from confronting himself with an avowal of the evil deed which he was about to perform. Clothed in the garb of cold language, he realized that it would appear in its full horror even to himself, and that this horror would be further intensified to him by its reflection in those who heard of it.

And yet the hour could not long be delayed when his household must be acquainted with the identity of its mysteriously expected guest.

"An armed force!" said Simone. "Truly this sounds romantic. I wager this lady is no ordinary guest."

"It is true," replied Corso. "She is no ordinary guest, but one to be treated in this household with the most special honour and distinction. It is your aunt Piccarda, who comes here this night."

"But she is a nun," said Filippo. "How comes it that she can leave the convent?"

"That matter concerns not thee," said his father angrily. "Suffice it for all of you to know what the whole world will know shortly. Piccarda leaves the convent for ever to-night, and three days hence, the nun's veil will be replaced by the bridal one, and she will wed Rossellino della Tosa."

"A nun to wed!" cried Agnese, trembling. "Nay, nay, this cannot be; 'tis sacrilege. The heavens themselves will forbid it."

"Silence!" thundered Corso. "The Church is not the only power in the land. Am I not to rule in my own household, and are not disobedience and defiance in women sins well deserving punishment? Piccarda entered the convent in opposition to my express desire."

"But a vow to heaven!" gasped Agnese. "Who ever heard the like! The Holy Father will surely never forgive this deed."

"Cease thy prating," said Corso angrily, "and see to those household matters for which alone thou art fitted. What I resolve upon for my sister concerns thee not, and, moreover, I am sick of thy perpetual jargon."

"Father!" cried Filippo, turning eyes of pain and indignation to him; "how canst thou speak thus to my mother?"

"Leave your mother to me, boy," said Corso. "It is not a woman's province to interfere in the concerns of men, and this matter that I have in hand lies beyond her understanding."

"Oh! father," cried the young man, "I beseech thee speak not thus, and pause even now ere this deed of violence against my aunt be committed. I was here at the time that she fled to the convent, as thou knowest, and if thou hadst known how she longed to escape from the world for which she was so little fitted, thou couldst not have refused her her heart's desire. You were wont to love her," he pleaded, "and, indeed, who could fail to love so gentle and saintly a soul? Leave her to the life she hath chosen of prayer and contemplation, and holy works, for in that she is blest with a sweet contentment, while in the midst of the world her spirit pines and languishes for the joys which are not of earth."

Corso listened in moody silence to his son's appeal. The better and nobler instincts of his nature were not unmoved by it, and he almost recoiled even now from the crime which struck such horror to his family. But at that moment an outside event caused a swift revulsion of feeling and stifled his better impulses almost ere they were born.

Loud cries and shouts were heard in the street, and from the casement which Corso hurriedly flung open, he gazed on a motley crowd of the town people, mostly composed of the lowest orders, who were passing below. As he did so, one of their number happened to glance up,

and a howl of execration such as no man can hear unmoved from his fellows smote on his ear.

"Down with the Baron Malefami!" cried a voice, and another rapidly chimed in with: "Three cheers for della Bella. Let the Friend of the People rule!"

One or two threatening gestures were made in Corso's direction, but eventually the rough procession passed on its way, and Corso closed the casement and returned to the room with his brow darker than before.

"The dogs!" he muttered through clenched teeth. "They shall feel my yoke upon them. They shall pay to the utmost for every insult given."

"What is it; what means this uproar?" asked Agnese in trembling accents as she watched the signs of disturbance on her husband's brow.

"It means," he said, "that the kennel and the gutter seek to govern Florence, led by that traitor to his own class, Giano della Bella. We may yet, who knows, live to see ourselves ruled by a democratic mob." He turned with sudden fierceness to his sons:

"Mark my words, you who are still young and have all life before you," he said; "you come of a noble race whose heads have ever been held high, you are members, as your ancestors were, of the proudest state in the whole of Italy, and the blood of many a noble flows in your veins. Will you sit calmly down and submit to the rule of butchers and scavengers? Will you brook that Florence shall be governed by the scum?"

"Nay, by my soul!" cried Simone. "Never shall the Donati house be domineered over by the vulgar so long as I have a right arm to defend it from this ignoble fate."

"Well spoken, Simone," cried his father, glancing with pride at his younger son. "But thou, Filippo, dost not speak. Surely thou wilt not allow thy younger brother to outstrip thee in zeal!"

"My zeal is for the cause of justice," said Filippo firmly, "and to the rulers who meet out that will I give my support. I love Florence no less dearly than thyself, but I would fain see the people less downtrodden and oppressed."

"The people deserve all and more than they get," said Corso, angrily. "I am disappointed, Filippo, in thy reply. It might almost be that of some follower of the canting renegade, della Bella himself, and ill-befits one of thy birth and upbringing. One might think thou hadst sympathy with the popular cause, and were prepared to help on the anarchy and disorder that must ensue, if once it gains ground. But enough of this, only I would have thee remember that it is necessary in this day of evil augury to strengthen our position on every side, and for this purpose it is essential that the marriage of thy aunt Piccarda to della Tosa take place without delay. Let not foolish sentiments of pity outweigh the patriotism and strength that you should both have as men."

He rose as he spoke and left the room, closing the door noisily behind him, perhaps to shut out the sound of a sob which broke from Agnese's lips.

"Alas!" she cried, wringing her hands, "I know not what hath befallen your father of . . . He was not wont to be thus ever fierce and angry, and I much fear that this deed of his will bring down on us all the anger of the Holy Father and the wrath of heaven itself. What must we do! What must we do?"

She turned in helpless dismay from one to the other of her sons, but while Filippo sought to comfort her, Simone's attention had wandered towards the window whence his father had watched the procession pass. A reflection of Corso's fiery ambition was already shown on his handsome, boyish features.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE CONVENT

At the Convent of St. Clara, all had long since been hushed in the stillness of night, and the nuns had all retired to their own cells, save two who kept watch in the chapel.

Piccarda lay peacefully asleep, dreaming her dreams. So far towards heaven had her soul already learnt to soar that often it would seem almost to have left its earthly habitation, and to dwell in regions populated by saints and angels.

Even in the daytime while she moved about in the performance of her daily task she was often little conscious of her surroundings, and while her body obeyed the dictates of her work her soul seemed meanwhile to be catching draughts of spiritual rapture from some far off mysterious source. She lived, in fact, in a world of glorious imaginings, of spiritual fervour, of mystic, unearthly love.

And when night came, and in the surrounding darkness her spiritual insight grew keener and more true, happy dreams visited her, and she liked to imagine that her soul was actually wafted to regions of heavenly bliss.

Suddenly, on the solemn stillness of the night came the sound of steady knocking. It broke in faint echoes on the dreams of the saintly nun, and she stirred uneasily in

her sleep, conscious vaguely of some discordant element. But gradually other sounds followed, and her dreams seemed to change in a cruel and unwonted manner. What crime had she committed, with what heinous sin could she unwittingly have stained her soul? Why should the heavenly harmonies suddenly become harsh and discordant sounds? What had changed the glad songs of the angels to sobs and sighs of grief?

Oh! surely now, they were thrusting her out of heaven! She was being dragged back to the convent, nay, not to the convent, but to the cruel world, to Florence, to the Donati Palace —!

With a terrified shriek, she awoke to find herself in a reality more horrible than any dream.

Rough men in clanging armour were around her, had violated the sacred privacy of her cell, had approached the very couch on which she lay. The sobs and cries of the heavenly denizens of her dreams were sounding instead from the lips of terrified nuns who fled past the open door in every direction.

"Mercy, mercy! Holy Jesus, our Lady of Grace, Holy Clara, save me!" she shrieked.

Surely one of the saints would hear her! Surely the heaven of her dreams was not so remote from her waking life that no help, no succour from its holy inmates, could reach to her here!

And now the Abbess swept into her view, pushing her way past the shrieking nuns, waving even the rude men aside in a storm of holy wrath and righteous indignation.

"Touch her not," she said, facing the ruffians, "or the curse of heaven be upon you! Lay not one finger on this lamb of Christ's sacred fold!"

For one moment, even the hardened hirelings who had not before shrunk from their vile task, cowed before the noble fury of this one woman, but it was for a moment only.

Their ring-leader, quick to see the signs of wavering, seized the Abbess by the arm and flung her roughly aside, and the next minute a barrier of armed men rushed in between her and their victim.

She had left her couch now and stood before them in her long robe of coarse, white serge, trembling, desperate, wide-eyed, with the stricken glance of a doe when the hounds are upon it.

If she could but reach the crucifix in the far corner, if she could but clasp that sacred symbol, surely then they would not dare to touch her! With an almost superhuman effort she wrenched herself free from the coarse hands which strove to bind her, and flung herself beside it.

"Jesus, Jesus! mercy! Holy Mother, save me!" she cried.

But with these words of agonized prayer on her lips, and one hand so tightly clasping the image of her crucified Saviour that it had to be forced apart, they seized and dragged her away.

A merciful swoon followed, and it was thus helpless and unconscious of her surroundings that at last they bore Piccarda from the convent back to her brother's house in Florence.

CHAPTER VIII

AT THE ALTAR

A FEW days later a marriage ceremony took place in the private chapel of the Donati Palace. Few besides the officiating priest, the bride and bridegroom, and he who gave away the bride, were present, for there were reasons which rendered it desirable to keep the event as quiet as possible.

Rossellino della Tosa was ready and waiting in his place for some time ere the bridal party appeared, and on his dark, sinister countenance there rested an expression of satisfied triumph. Yet surely there were little cause for triumph when at last the door communicating with the Palace opened, and Corso Donati appeared, half-dragging, half-supporting the bride.

Almost distraught with grief, worn out by her fruitless tears and vain entreaties, Piccarda was brought at last in a desperate and nearly fainting condition to the altar.

A whispered order and some gold pieces thrust in the hands of the officiating priest, caused the service to be hurried through with all possible speed, and in a few minutes, Rossellino della Tosa and Piccarda Donati were joined in the eyes of the Church and of the law as man and wife.

And now as the priest stepped down from the chancel

and the acolyte moved to put out the great wax lights, the bridegroom, with a quietly exultant smile on his thin lips, advanced to claim his bride. But as he approached Piccarda where she stood apart clinging in frantic despair to her brother, a wild shriek suddenly echoed through the chapel, and the next moment she had sprung from him and stood in front of the altar, one hand raised threateningly aloft as though about to strike, the other pressed convulsively to her bosom.

"Touch me not!" she cried. "Come not one step nearer. I am the bride of heaven; this body is dedicated to my Lord. Let no man dare to defile it!"

"None shall, sweet lady," said della Tosa, in a voice the soft, persuasive tones of which did not conceal the spirit of cruel determination beneath them. "No man shall dare to touch you, except him whom the Church hath just joined to you in holy wedlock. In the embraces of your lawful husband there can be no defilement."

He again advanced towards her, but with a cry of unutterable horror she fled from him and threw herself at Corso's feet.

"Save me, brother! save me," she implored. "I am vowed to heaven. I cannot wed. Save me by the love you seemed to bear me of old."

"It is too late, little sister," said Corso. "Thy own husband hath, as he says, the first right to thee now."

"Nay, nay," she moaned, "'tis heaven that hath the first right. I have vowed myself to my Lord. To break my vow were sacrilege. Let not that man come near. Save me, Corso, save me!"

"It grows late," said della Tosa, with a note of slight impatience in his usually calm voice, "and since our

marriage is to be celebrated by no feast at present, there can be nothing further to delay our departure. It seems somewhat unusual for a bridegroom to be kept thus waiting. Donna Piccarda, thou wilt now accompany me to my house. Allow me the honour."

"Go, Piccarda," whispered Corso, freeing himself from her clasp, though his heart almost repented of his deed as he watched her agonized countenance and wild gestures of despair. "Go, dear sister. He loves thee truly, and all will be well."

Thus cast off by the only person from whom she could seek protection, helpless, deserted, and distraught, Piccarda was placed in her husband's arms, and half-carried by him from the chapel.

Surely never lover bore to his home a more pitiable and reluctant bride!

CHAPTER IX

A LAST APPEAL

Two days later, towards nightfall, as Corso sat alone in his private apartment, the door opened swiftly and Piccarda rushed into the room—Piccarda, but how changed from the happy, peaceful nun of so short a time before ! Every trace of the holy joy, the radiant purity which had distinguished her face, had fled, and in its place reigned the agonized shame of outraged womanhood, the terror of one whose soul is hunted to death. Some remains of former beauty were indeed still discernible, but it was the beauty resembling the after-glow of a sunset, a beauty from which the animating glory and light had fled. In her wild, dilated eyes shone the light of a helpless terror akin to madness, and from the drawn white lips all sound refused at first to come.

"Piccarda !" cried Corso, gazing at her horror-struck. "What evil thing hath befallen thee ?"

She knelt and bared her bosom to him.

"Slay me !" she moaned. "If ever thou hast had one spark of love for me, slay me now. Strike here, strike swiftly. Let not this defiled body live another hour. I should have done the deed myself, but alas ! this weak will, this feeble hand refuse their task."

"Thou art mad !" cried Corso aghast. "Thy brain is overwrought by excitement. I beseech thee calm thyself."

"Kill me! kill me!" she implored. "I have desecrated my vow. I have allowed this body dedicated to my Lord to be outraged and defiled. Kill me, brother!"

But while Corso gazed speechless and in sore perplexity at the wreck wrought by his own crime, the door quietly opened from behind him and della Tosa entered.

"I have come to fetch home my wife," he said in his usual calm even tones.

Piccarda gazed at him with eyes in which the wild terror grew to frenzy. Her pale lips parted to emit no sound, she remained dumb and paralyzed with horror. But as he approached a step nearer, it seemed as if suddenly something snapped in her poor, distracted brain, unable to endure more.

"Where am I?" she cried wildly. "Who is that before me? Ah! take those cruel eyes away. It is Satan, it is the Devil himself come to claim me! Let not those arms come near. Let them not twine round this body and drag me down to hell. Jesus! Mary!—Corso, help me, help me!" And with that last cry of anguish and despair she swayed an instant, then fell senseless at the feet of her husband.

The two men faced each other for a few seconds in helpless perplexity.

"This comes of the cursed convent," said della Tosa at length. "'Tis the result of her life there," and as Corso made no reply, he continued, "'Twere well to summon assistance, were it not? The sooner she be borne to her home, the better, it seems to me."

But the higher instincts of Corso's nature for once triumphed.

"She is of my own flesh and blood. She hath sought

refuge here. It is here she shall abide till this illness be overcome," he said in tones of sudden determination, and springing to the door, he summoned the women of the household and bade them bear the stricken lady to the chamber she occupied ere she was wed.

A week later, the chapel of the Donati Palace again witnessed a solemn ceremony, and once more to the altar was borne the body of Corso's sister. But this time it was as no reluctant, terrified bride, but as one whose gentle soul had found the heaven for which it pined, whose tortured body was for ever at peace.

On the night of the funeral, della Tosa sought out his accomplice and flung before him a heavy bag of gold.

"I have had but little joy of my bride," he said, "yet a bargain is a bargain and you have a right to your part of it."

But Corso, with a soul oppressed by sorrow, and by a remorse which, alas! was destined to be but short-lived, cast the gold on the floor at his brother-in-law's feet with a fierce oath.

"Take your cursed money," he cried. "I would give that and more to place my saintly sister once more in the convent whence we wrenched her. Take your gold, della Tosa. 'Tis the price of blood!"

CHAPTER X

SYMPATHY

THE whole episode of Piccarda's abduction, marriage and death had profoundly stirred the sensitive nature of Filippo, and not until after her funeral did he seek Leonora. He feared lest the sympathy which he knew awaited him there might lead him to let loose some of the terrible feelings which raged within him, and that in deploring the fate of his gentle aunt he might utter expressions of anger and hate against the perpetrators of it, and say things of his own father which it were better not to speak even to her ears. He had loved Piccarda from the time when, as a small boy, he had stood at her knees entranced while she told him stories of saints and angels. Her unearthly loveliness, the heavenly radiance which even from her earliest years had marked her countenance, and the sweet, musical tones of her voice, had combined to touch in him those chords of poetic and religious feeling which are often so much more awake in childhood than in later life, and he accorded her a romantic worship which placed her in a shrine apart, and which she had never ceased to occupy for him. But now this sacred shrine in which she dwelt had been violated by the rough hands of his own father, and his aunt herself had been laid low and her heart broken, by the same agency. Well

might the hot blood surge in waves of horrified indignation within him at the thought, and only his close relationship to Corso prevented him from encouraging a wish for that revenge which otherwise he would have considered it a pious duty to seek.

But now all was over. The cruel designs of men, the ambitious scheming of the world, could trouble the gentle spirit no more, and Filippo, in his fresh grief at her death, felt no longer able to abstain from the one source of comfort which he possessed.

Leonora's quick eyes noticed as soon as he entered that, brief though their parting had been as measured by actual time, it had been long in those inner experiences which are a truer gauge. The Filippo whom she had last seen was one who stood as it were on the side of a deep stream gazing across it with anxious dread, and now he was as one who had been swept into the current of that stream, and cruelly beaten by the waves.

With the general details of all that had befallen the Donati house in the interval, Leonora was, of course, acquainted, and now with the truest tact and consideration she tried to show him her sympathy without causing him to speak on the painful subject. For a time they remained side by side in silence, but at last the healing balm of her presence brought to Filippo the relief of speech.

"She was conscious before the end," he broke out suddenly, with that abrupt introduction of a subject near the heart only possible between those united in affection and who know that the same thoughts are occupying both.

"I saw her, Leonora, lying on her couch so changed

that I had hardly known her. Oh ! my God, it is agony to contemplate what that gentle soul must have endured thus to mark her countenance with signs of woe unspeakable. She asked for me," he continued brokenly, "and she knew me at once when I entered, though often her mind would wander, and she bade me not to weep, since her greatest joy was to die. Then a heavenly smile shone on her face, till almost it seemed as of yore, save that not even that smile could obliterate the cruel ravages of pain. 'I had such a blessed dream last night,' she said. 'I thought that my Saviour came to me with the dear marks of His passion on hands and feet. I knelt to embrace them as S. Mary did of old, knowing myself all unworthy for even that humble office. Then meseemed that He raised me very tenderly, with the light of divine forgiveness in His eye, and bade me be of good cheer. "What cheer, my Lord?" I sobbed. "I have broken my vow, my robe is soiled. How can I hope to enter Thy kingdom?"' and then she said—and here a smile of ineffable sweetness shone on her face—'At this He spake to me blessed words of pardon and hope, and told me that though the highest place of all could no longer be mine, that in the lowest of the heavenly spheres one still awaited me, where I might sing and praise Him, and know contentment and peace.'

"Never saw I such divine beauty on any face as now shone on hers," he continued, "and her sweet and holy contentment at the thought of a low place in heaven made me weep the more, for God knows no truer saint ever lived on earth than she. And then, again, her sweet mind began to wander, and whether it were the sight of my tears I do not know, but she seemed to think I was

once more a child at her side, and she sought to comfort me with stories as of old, and sang sweet snatches of strange songs about the flowers in our Lady's garden and the stars revolving round God's throne.

"The next day," he added, after a pause, "she was visited by a lady named Cunizza, who had loved her in the convent and who now bides with the Cavalcanti family. I understood that she left the convent on purpose to follow my aunt to Florence, and though I am told she was far from being a saint in her own younger days, it was beautiful to see the tender devotion she displayed to my aunt, while she herself clung to her with such affection that Cunizza stayed with her to the end.

"One other only saw her during those few remaining days, and that was he of whom thy father spake the other day, young Dante Alighieri. He is shortly to be allied to our house by his marriage with Gemma, a daughter of my father's cousin, Manetto, and so claims already some relationship with us. But apart from that, my aunt remembered him of old, and when the Lady Cunizza, who had seen him at the Cavalcanti's house, which he much frequents, happened to mention his name, she, to everyone's surprise, expressed a wish to see him. It seems that they had often held converse formerly, and in the ardent soul of Dante my aunt had found much congenial to her own.

"Thus it chanced that Dante visited her on her death-bed, and left it moved to the depths of his soul. I was in the ante-room as he passed out, and he stayed and discoursed with me. He told me that in my aunt's presence it were as if he had seen the very gates of heaven open, and the joy of the saints appear to his gaze. Too

profoundly touched indeed was he to say much, yet he confessed that in her holy contentment and resignation he had learnt a lesson which time could never efface from his mind. Even as he spake, the tears coursed down that face which men sometimes call stern and cold, and he trembled as though he would fall, shaken to the core by pity and grief and indignation.

"'Woe!' he cried, 'to the hand which hath laid this angel low.'

"Then suddenly, remembering in whose presence he spake, he turned to me.

"'Forgive me, Filippo,' he said. 'Truly pity and grief have well-nigh mastered me.'

"And turning abruptly, he went his way."

"And yet," said Leonora, with tears in her eyes, "one cannot grieve for the lady's own sake. It is well that so sweet a soul should leave this world of sin and strife, and to those who remain the loss of her presence must be softened by that thought."

"Yea," said Filippo, with a sudden contraction of the brow, "her loss, as thou sayest, Leonora, brings its own consolation, and a loss by death is after all but a small one compared with the loss of one we love, by the means of a dastardly sin which kills the affection and destroys the admiring regard of our youth. The one sorrow is of earth, 'tis but a separation of our physical being from the one it loves, the other is of the soul and strikes at the very root of our being. The only true death, the only death that need cause despair, is experienced by us then—the death of love itself. Such a death slays with it the best part of our nature, and is relieved by no hope of a joyful resurrection."

But now on the sorrowful thoughts of the young people there broke the sounds of many footsteps and of loud voices.

" 'Tis my father returning," cried Leonora, while a glow of eager expectation chased the shadow which Filippo's words had brought to her face.

She rose as she spoke, and going to the casement flung it wide open and leant out.

" He comes triumphant ! " she cried, as she caught sight of Giano approaching on horseback surrounded by an admiring, cheering crowd. " The day is won ! He returns," she added in a hurried explanation to Filippo, " from the council meeting which was to decide whether the special court of the *Ordini d'Arbitrato* was to be established or not. If it be, there will be full power given to the government to alter and revise the statutes, and, as you know, that is the first step towards that noble reform in the state for which my father strives and longs. The election of the new Prior takes place next month, and who can doubt that he will be chosen a member of them ! Oh, Filippo ! this is like to be a great day for Florence ! "

It was impossible for Filippo not to catch some reflection from the ardour of the woman he loved, and in the atmosphere of her glowing patriotism the sense of his private misfortunes and griefs was for the moment thrust aside.

And now the cries of the approaching crowd could be distinguished, and the words : " Long live della Bella ! Huzza for the Friend of the People ! " resounded in the air.

At the entrance to his own house, della Bella dismounted, and handing his horse to the care of an attendant, he stood for a while facing the people. His face was

illuminated by the glow of noble aspiration and of triumph.

"My friends," he said, in clear, ringing accents, "you do well to rejoice. This is a great day, for on it has been taken the first step which will lead us to victory. Already in the eastern sky it would seem that the first faint ray of light heralds the approach of the risen sun. Our night is ended. Our day begins to dawn. The oppression which hath weighed you down to the earth so long shall shortly disappear, and in its place shall shine the divine form of justice. My friends, I have fought and striven for this day simply to attain for you this your birthright. Every man born into this world has the right to personal consideration and to be treated, not as one of a mob to be down-trodden by the few, but as an individual soul claiming as his sacred right the divine gifts of freedom and equity. Too long has this truth been ignored in Florence. The rights of the individual have been trampled on, and those who have been endowed by no merit of their own with more of the world's goods than yourselves have lorded it over you with oppression and injustice. This shall speedily be altered now. The day of the nobles is over."

"Ay," interrupted a voice, "down with the nobles ! Let the people rule !"

"Yes, down with the nobles," said della Bella ; "not because they are noble, but because, being born without any choice of their own to wealth and power, they have abused those gifts. For such crimes as theirs, but one punishment is meet. Those who have misused power shall wield it no more ; those who have misruled shall no longer rule. We will see to that. By the new ordinances

that shall be brought forward, no noble shall hold office in our midst, the government shall be entirely in the hands of those worthy followers of trades and professions whose fellows elect them to it, and if it be desired to exclude any one of the popolani from ever holding office, he shall be ennobled, and thus nobility become no longer an honour but a disgrace."

Loud cheers broke forth, and with them once more the cry:

"Down with the nobles! Down with the nobles! Long live the People's Friend!"

"And now, my friends," he continued, "I would ask you to disperse quietly to your homes. In a fortnight's time meet me again in the great Piazza, and there I will tell you more of the new laws it is proposed to pass."

He turned and entered his house, and such was the obedience which the crowd at this time paid to his slightest wish that in a few minutes the street was emptied.

Leonora, from her place at the window, had followed her father's speech with the closest attention, but during its course, the eyes of her lover noticed that the eager joyfulness of her expression seemed to give way to a look of troubled thoughtfulness, and now, after she had given della Bella the first warm greetings and congratulations, the thought which had disturbed her found expression in words.

"Is all you said as to the nobles being precluded from every public office indeed to be made law?" she asked, anxiously.

"That is my desire," replied della Bella, "and I have little doubt that the court will act on my suggestion."

"Pardon me, dear father," she said half timidly, yet with great earnestness, "if I seem to speak of matters beyond my comprehension, but are you sure that so revolutionary a step as that is altogether wise? Will the people be quite ready for so sudden a change from servitude to power, and is not the danger run that they, in their first over-zeal, may forget the sacred cause of justice and be carried away by a thirst for revenge? And even if this be not so, have not the nobles their rights too; should they not be considered even as the people are?"

"The nobles have forfeited their rights," said della Bella, who, in his zeal, would not listen with patience to any hint of opposition. "Canst thou have forgotten the accumulated miseries for which my heart bleeds? What about the Bosticchi Palace* with its recent victims strung up and tortured there? What of the innocent populani attacked and stabbed as they pursue their peaceful way, while so great the injustice of our rule that none be found who dare accuse the murderers. What of the men among us who go through life disfigured by slit ears and noses, or worse still, disabled by the loss of a right hand, and all as the punishment for some paltry, or, in some cases, imaginary offence? Canst thou contemplate these iniquities and then calmly ask that consideration be shown to the perpetrators of them?"

"But not all are equally guilty of these outrages," said Leonora softly; "and surely, it is justice we would seek, and to punish all alike were hardly that."

"It is justice to prevent such evil deeds by strong and decided measures," he answered impatiently. "Thy

* The Bosticchi Palace was a byword in Florence for these practices. (See Compagni.)

woman's heart outruns thy wit, Leonora, as is ever the case with thy sex."

But it was the very truth in Leonora's words which was the secret cause for della Bella's impatient reception of them. In his heart he knew that there was much in what she said, and afterwards, when it was too late, he thought of them again with bitter regret.

CHAPTER XI

THE GREAT ENACTMENTS

IN the great Piazza of Florence a large and heterogeneous concourse of people was assembled. The populace predominated ; but there was also a large proportion of the *popolani grassi* or merchant class, and with them a fair sprinkling of nobles, who kept for the most part on the edge of the crowd, and were accompanied by armed retainers whose services it was not improbable they might require before the day was out.

The eyes of nobles and plebeians alike were turned in the direction of a rough scaffold erected at one side of the Piazza, and soon there was a loud burst of applause not unaccompanied by hisses, as the well-known figure of Giano della Bella appeared on it, surrounded by the Priors and other members of the government, whose crimson robes made a bright background to the simple leather tunic of a Florentine citizen, which Giano himself wore.

Mingling with the populace, but in a corner where he hoped to escape observation, was Filippo, who could not resist this opportunity of being present on an occasion so full of importance to the woman he loved, for the assembled crowd had gathered there with no less an object than to hear della Bella's explanation of the

famous Enactments called the *Ordinances of Justice*, which at last he had a prospect of making law.

Filippo kept his hood well over his face and was careful not to meet the eyes of others present, for he knew that his presence there unattended would at least give rise to unpleasant comment, and to go as a noble and avowed enemy of della Bella's, which was the only way he could have openly appeared, was impossible to him. Corso himself was not among the nobles present on account of the mourning in which his house was plunged owing to the death of Piccarda, and also of the scandal and bad odium to himself excited by the story of her marriage and the part he had played in it. Until there had been time for the public to lose sight of these events in those of greater importance to themselves, and until the penance ordered by the Pope had been carried out, Corso wisely elected to remain in private. Filippo, in spite of his wish to remain concealed, had not been long in his position when he noticed, to his annoyance, that his uncle, Vieri dei Cerchi, was standing near and appeared to have recognised him, and as he drew his hood yet more closely round his face he felt still more uncomfortable when he noticed that a youth belonging to the Galastrone family, which was on anything but friendly terms with his own, had fixed his eyes upon him. He moved a little further away, hoping thus to be lost to their sight and to make good his escape as soon as della Bella's eagerly awaited speech should be over.

And now the confusion of voices which sounded on every side gave way to a hoarse roar of welcome as della Bella stepped forward.

The keen, mobile face of the Friend of the People lit

up for a minute with a ray of undisguised pleasure at the warmth of his reception, and later this was quoted against him by his enemies as a proof of his love of popularity. It was true that he found delight in the love of the people for whose good he so earnestly strove, but this arose from that natural wish for response sought by love; that he valued popularity for its own sake is forever refuted by the proof he ultimately gave to the contrary.

And now those low, vibrating tones, which had so great a power to thrill the heart, broke on the ears of the listening multitude, and della Bella stepped forward.

"My friends, my dear friends,"* he said, "I, as yourselves, have suffered from the insolence of the great. Notwithstanding my rank by birth, my position in the State, and my power, I have been subject to the gross outrages of a class inflated by a false idea of their own importance. But if I allude to this now, it is but to prove that I am a fellow-sufferer with you, and thus to draw you to me by still one more tie. For only they who have themselves experienced a wrong can fully sympathise with those smarting under one. It is not to air my private grievances that I have assembled you here to-day. If it were these alone which lay at my heart, should I not readily find private opportunity to avenge them. Why then are we thus assembled? My friends, it is because I see your helplessness to contend against your wrongs. It is because I see not only the rights of the individual trampled upon, but the destruction of our very State itself threatened. Beneath what are mere

* For the substance of della Bella's speech, see Napier's "History of Florence," Vol. I.

delusive forms the spirit of freedom hath fled from our midst, and we are in a worst condition than those sister states which have fallen beneath the rule of the tyrant and the despot. Instead of one, we tremble at the nod of many, and where they have hope that the death of a monster may one day end their sufferings, we can have no such consolation, for our tyrants, hydra-like, are continually sprouting, and thus our hopes are extinguished and our pains rendered immortal. Shall we then calmly sit down and let the coils of this serpent wind round us till we are strangled, or shall we, casting womanish fears aside, act like men and strike at the monster ere it prove too late ? ”

A hoarse murmur of growing excitement here interrupted the speaker, and above it rose the loud voice of Pecora the butcher.

“ Ay, strike at it ! strike at it ! ” he shouted. “ Down with every tyrant ! Let the nobles lick the very dust at our feet. ”

“ Hear, hear ! ” said another voice. “ Strike at the aristocrats. Let the butcher use his knife to better purpose than the slaying of innocent cattle and sheep. Down with the nobles ! ”

Other voices, hoarse with excitement, swelled the chorus, and on the faces of some of the mob dark clouds of evil intent gathered, and the hands of many strayed towards the dagger at their belt.

The better class citizens began to cast anxious glances at each other, and the few nobles present started to edge their way further from the centre of the crowd.

But now della Bella's voice was again heard above the tumult, and the wonderful magnetism of the man caused

the gathering storm to subside, while the attention of every one present was again concentrated on him.

"My friends, my dear friends," he cried, once more stretching out his hands to them in earnest appeal; "let not the violence of your passions carry you away with them, I beseech. Not thus can your sufferings be rightly avenged and your condition amended. There is a better means, believe me, of restoring peace and prosperity in our midst, of placing once more on its rightful pedestal the sacred forms of justice, than by strife and bloodshed. Hear me in patience for a moment, I implore. Public liberty is composed of two ingredients—of good laws and of their just administration. When these are stronger than individuals then is freedom maintained; but when there are citizens powerful enough to defy both, then it is abandoned. This have we all lately witnessed. We have seen our sacred rights trampled in the dust; we have seen rapine, fire, wounds, and even death itself inflicted with impunity by this tyrannical nobility. I know all the danger of my words, but a citizen's duty is to speak boldly, aye, and not only to speak but to act too, when the good of his country demands it.

"Reckless, contemptuous, insolent, these nobles ride through our streets treating the honest citizens of our state with less consideration than the dirt beneath their feet. They are dreaded by all but their own class, from the poorest hewer of wood or drawer of water to the chief magistrates of our republic. Neither the life nor property of our men, nor the honour of our women are safe from them."

His voice sank in tones of bitter irony, "And this, my

friends, is liberty ! This is the liberty of which Florence hath ever boasted herself the proud possessor ! ”

Again the hoarse roar of the crowd, like that of a wild beast thirsting for its prey, interrupted the speaker, but soon he again commanded silence.

“ Thus, my friends,” he continued, “ have I spoken to remind you of the present condition of our state, but this is in truth already well known to you all, and it is not for this alone that I have called you together. I have called you here not merely to contemplate the disease, but to consider,” and here his voice rang out triumphantly, “ what the remedy is to be. Shall we sit down like cravens to bear these wrongs that we so clearly realise ?

God forbid ! Had I no object but to excite your feelings of vengeance and hate by calling you here, then should I myself deserve all the scorn I feel for them. But this is not so. I have the remedy to propose. Your laws against these evils of murder, robbery and outrage exist, though they are discarded and forgotten. Let them be called into immediate action, and let more be added if requisite ; and requisite they will be, for you cannot bind a monster with pack thread, and the cords made for the holding of an infant must be exchanged for chains and cables to restrain a giant !

“ And first, what we want is a head. Let such a one be elected to hold the standard of justice in our midst. Let him be called the Gonfalonier of Justice, and a thousand citizens taken from every ward of the city be enrolled as his guard to support him in the task of carrying out the law. With such a force, these arrogant nobles can be taught to obey the laws they have so long defied, and their insolence and audacity shall be curbed. But

that is not enough. The evil has grown too great for this alone to stay it. Let those to whom wealth and rank have already given power, be deprived of every public honour and office, that the balance may be made more even ; let their evidence not be accepted in court against one of the people that they have treated so unjustly. Let them be punished in future for every act against a citizen by total destruction of property, and lest one should escape, let each member of a family be held responsible for the sins of his kinsmen."

An intense silence had reigned during this speech, but now as the speaker paused for a moment, tongues once more broke loose. Loud cheers rose from many throats, but amid his own followers murmurs of disapproval could also be heard. At last one voice made itself heard above the tumult.

"We ask for justice," it said. "We do not wish to form laws which are cruel, even if directed against our enemies."

"Such laws," replied della Bella, "might be cruel in a well-ordered state. But in severe cases, severe remedies must be applied, and pity then becomes more dangerous than rigour."

But even as he spake a flood of pity welled up from the tender depths of his own heart and sent waves of tragic emotion over him.

"Would to heaven!" he broke out, "that we could all live together amicably, and this hateful strife disappear. I ask for naught better than peace and brotherly love amongst us. But what would you have me do? This proud aristocracy not only scorns our society and tramples on our laws, but, like some wild, ferocious beast,

lashes its own sides and roars with ungovernable fury. Look but at its own fierce conflicts and deadly feuds, its struggles for private power led on by hate of house against house. Look at the broils, the wounds, the murders, which desecrate our streets, and then tell me if we can safely delay the remedy. The State is now at peace ; no foreign enemy hangs on our frontier to divert attention from domestic good ; let us therefore improve an occasion the neglect of which may doom us to everlasting sorrow."

With these words della Bella closed his speech, and ere another month had passed, he was elected one of the Priors of the city with full opportunity for making his great Enactments law.

As soon as the proceedings were over, Filippo attempted to slip away from the crowd ; but he found this no such easy task, as the people had pressed behind him, and the exit on that side of the square was therefore closed. Much to his annoyance, too, he perceived young Galastrone near to him, and noticed that he was slowly edging his way through the crowd in his direction. A few minutes later, he felt his hand on his shoulder, and his voice whispered in his ear :

" Who would have thought to see a son of Donati present on such an occasion ? "

" A son of Donati hath as much right to be present as one of the Galastrone," replied Filippo.

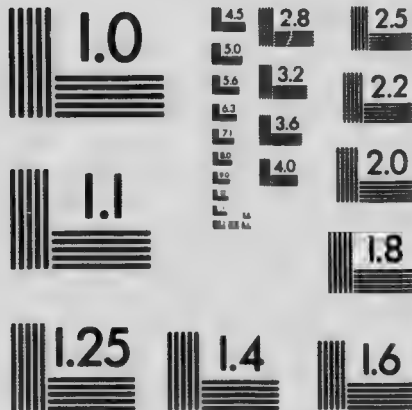
" According to what we have just heard that right is like soon to be different," replied Galastrone with a sneer. " Thy day is doomed, thou young coxcomb of aristocracy, and soon the whole of Florence will dare to spit in thy face, as I do now."

The hot blood of the Donati race surged in Filippo's



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veins at this insult, and heedless of the cause which he upheld, and of aught, indeed, but his own honour and the dignity of his house, he replied :

" And the whole of the Donati house will be ready to wipe out the insult, as I do now."

And with these words he seized his dagger and made an ugly slit on Galastrone's nose.

A smaller incident than this were enough at the time to saturate a whole town with blood, but for the moment this indiscretion on the part of the youths had no serious result. Ere young Galastrone had time to use his dagger in return, he was seized in no gentle fashion by some of the superior citizens who happened to be standing near.

" Fool ! " whispered one of them ; " dost not see that an uproar now would be the most fatal thing possible for the cause. Put up thy dagger, which thou mayst require more another day, and go home and dress thy wound with all speed."

Reluctant to obey, but powerless to resist, young Galastrone allowed himself to be dragged away, muttering curses and imprecations against the whole Donati race, and in the confusion Filippo hastened to make good his own escape.

The matter was hushed up for the time, but was not forgotten, and later was indirectly to bear serious fruit for the whole of Florence, and more especially for both Corso Donati and Giano della Bella.

CHAPTER XII

A WHISPER OF EVIL

DURING the weeks immediately following Piccarda's death, Corso was apparently a changed man. His better nature was for the moment profoundly stirred by the tragedy in which he had played so ignoble a part. In this mood he dismissed from his mind the languorous eyes and dark beauty of Uguccione's daughter and sought to atone for his crime by inward remorse, as well as by those outward tokens of penitence demanded by the Church. Perhaps motives of self-interest were not far absent from the latter, since it was likely to have serious consequences for his political ambition if he forfeited the favour of the Pope ; but at the same time, when he performed the public act of humiliation imposed by the Holy Father, and walked through the streets of Florence barefoot, and carrying a lighted taper in his hand, his penitence was not one of outward display alone. Mingled with the dread of the punishment which might await his crime in the world beyond the grave, and his anxiety to lessen those pangs by every means available while still on earth, were pangs of a true remorse. Meanwhile, the sensation caused in Florence by the rapidly succeeding events of Piccarda's abduction, marriage and death, great though it had been at the time, was rapidly being lost sight of in the rush of political

events, though in one poetic soul, that of Dante Alighieri, had the story sunk too deeply to be thus swept away, embedding itself there in crude ore of horror, and tenderness, and overwhelming pity, to be coined after the lapse of years in words which should touch the heart of man as long as literature lasts.

Corso too, now that his peace had been made with Christ's representative on earth, began again to turn his mind to the active world of politics. It would seem at present as if the object for which he had sacrificed Piccarda were further than ever from his attainment. The cause of the people had continued to make rapid advance in the hands of their beloved leader, and every day the faces of the nobles grew darker as they realised that their most cherished privileges were to be snatched from them.

One afternoon, about two months after the death of Piccarda, Corso was walking gloomily down a narrow street which ran past one side of the Bargello. His mind was occupied in unpleasant brooding on the political aspect of things, and the lighter side of life was for the moment absent from his thoughts, when he felt something soft strike his cheek, and a large, red rose fell on the pavement before him.

He stooped to pick up the flower, and on raising his eyes instinctively to the building above him, they met those of Donna Lucia, who was standing at a window on the first floor.

"Ah! Messer Corso," she said, leaning as far out of the window as she could, "is it indeed you whom I have unwittingly struck with my rose? Well is it that it was no harder substance that my careless hands let fall

at the very moment when you chanced to pass below."

What Italian of the thirteenth, or indeed of any century, could let pass such an opportunity for a display of gallantry? Not Corso Donati, at any rate. He stood beneath the window holding the rose in his hand and feasting his eyes on the subtle charms of the face above him, while uttering pretty speeches in which much was said of beautiful roses armed with thorns which wound, of darts from fair eyes more dangerous than many a warlike weapon, and the like.

The street was for the moment deserted, and the pretty comedy proceeded without interruption, until the sounds of a horse's hoofs in the distance gave warning of interruption, whereupon Corso, with a gesture of farewell, turned to go. The lady, however, had no intention of thus closing the play, almost ere the first scene was finished.

"I prithee," she cried in mock alarm, "give me back my harmless rose."

Corso was about to make a jesting refusal, but something in her glance seemed to change his intention.

"Most gladly would I restore it," he replied, "were I but within your reach, but I cannot well scale the wall without danger of injury to the flower. It would ill-beseem for the blossom which but lately adorned so fair a bosom to meet with rough usage."

"Nay, nonsense," said Donna Lucia impatiently, as the sounds of approaching hoofs drew nearer. "Twould ill-beseem for you to be seen thus parleying with me and holding my rose in your hand. Gossip might say I had dropped it intentionally."

Then in a hurried whisper she added: "The door to

your right is unbolted. The staircase leads here. Hurry, I entreat, ere anyone approaches."

The next minute Corso was able to place the rose in her hand as they stood face to face, and yet now that the difficulty was thus overcome, the lady seemed inclined to relent, and was in no hurry to claim it.

"Now thou art come," she said, dropping the formal mode of speech, "I prithee stay a brief while. I am so lonely," she continued plaintively. "Had I but known how dull is the life in a Podestà's household I vow I had never come here."

"And yet Messer Lucino hath broken down some of the customs for a Podestà not to entertain nor enter society," said Corso.

"'Tis not Messer Lucino who hath broken it down," she replied with a little smile. "My cousin, Donna Giovanna and I it is who refuse to live the life of prisoners or nuns, and have forced him to try to abolish so foolish a precedent. Florence may exclaim at such unusual doings, but after all, is it not we women who really make history, and rule the destinies of the world!"

"Florence can be but eager to overlook any departure from precedent which brings two such lovely ladies into her midst," said Corso.

"Yet all the same one goes to their entertainments, to the balls and suppers, under a kind of protest which is not pleasant," she replied. "But after all, I have naught to compel me to remain here, and if the life pleases me not, why should I not return to Lucca?"

"Nay, be not so cruel, leave not Florence," cried Corso, the slumbering flame of his passion suddenly

fanned again into life by this threat of her departure. "I entreat thee bide here, and soon Florence cannot fail to give so much beauty all the warmth of welcome it deserves. If Messer Lucino and his lady go not always forth, it is no reason why their kinswoman should also bide at home."

"But little difference could it make to you," she replied coldly, "whether I bide at home or go forth. Since the night that thou camest here, I have met you nowhere. Have I done aught to offend you that you thus seem to shun me?"

"Nay, nay," he protested, "reasons quite otherwise have kept me from festivity. Surely you have heard of the misfortune which plunged all my house into mourning?"

"True, I had for the moment forgotten your bereavement," she said. "Ah! well, perhaps you did ill to take your sister from the convent. Such women as she are not fit to be made the mothers of men. It is best for them to leave the world for the convent—or for heaven!"

"For my sin I have repented and atoned," said Corso, with darkening brow.

"Nay, I did not call it a sin," she said quietly. "For my part I admire a man who fears not to perform desperate deeds in pursuit of a great end. 'Tis unfortunate that matters have ended as they did, for your alliance with the della Tosa house would have been of great value had your sister lived, and times are bad now that della Bella is actually in office as a Prior and his iniquitous enactments are to be made law. The nobles indeed need all the support to be had, and your sister's alliance with

so powerful a family might have gone far to counter-balance the harm done by your connection with the Cerchi. Had it been Donna Agnese now, instead of your sister to be taken —— ”

“ Hush, hush, talk not thus, I beseech you,” cried Corso, starting in horror at the evil thoughts which rushed into his mind at her words.

“ Mistake me not,” she said. “ I do it no harm. It would indeed be sad for her family were the good and gentle Donna Agnese to die. I was thinking for the moment but of the State and of the cause of the nobles. But after all, death must befall each of us some day, and who can have everything in life ? A kind and virtuous, if homely wife, may happen for instance, to be incompatible with political success, and there have ever been some to whom the cause of their country, the welfare of their native land, came before every other consideration. Such men have risen to the topmost pinnacle of power, have been the saviours of their country, and the leaders of her people, though, at who knows what personal sacrifice ? It may be that they have committed grave crimes in the achievement of their purpose, crimes which have tortured their souls with agony and remorse, yet what was their own suffering, what the pangs even of a tortured conscience, compared with the welfare of the land which they loved more than their own life ? ”

“ Talk not thus,” he cried to her fiercely. “ You know not what you are doing, what evil thoughts you cause to breed and harbour in this brain. You fill me with a burning fire, a longing to satisfy at all price the ambitious cravings of my soul, which, if indulged in, might hurry me on to the execution of deeds I hardly dare to name.”

"Oh! Corso," she cried, fixing her eyes, aglow with wicked admiration, upon him, "how truly great you are now, verily a man—strong, masterful, sublime! For you and for your sake I could do any wild deed. I would dare and risk everything. Ah! my king of men, what might we not accomplish together, you and I?"

The intoxication of her presence seized the man again, rushing in an ugly tide over his better nature, until every trace of it was lost to view. He seized her hands in a burning, passionate clasp, and would have drawn her into his arms, but she resisted him.

"No, no," she cried, "you forget—I too, for one wild moment, had almost forgotten—surely you, a married man, would not dishonour me even by a kiss. Nay, come not nearer——"

Yet even as she spoke she allowed the warm fragrance of her lips to breathe on him.

"Lucia!" he cried, hoarse with passion, "were I free, were I not bound to another, would you be my wife?"

"What use to discuss the impossible," she whispered.

"Answer me!" he replied. "Give me at least the consolation or the torture of knowing."

"Then need you ask?" she whispered. "Cannot you see for yourself that the whole of my heart and soul are indeed yours, and that to be your wife would be to me the greatest happiness that life could hold? Ah! woe is me that I love you!"

This time she offered no resistance to his embrace, and for a moment he held her in his arms and showered burning kisses on her. Then, once more, she wrenched herself free.

"Go!" she cried. "Leave me for ever. As things are thy presence is but torture to me."

"Lucia!" he cried, "I cannot leave you! I cannot give you up! Your beauty enchains me, and in your brave and daring soul my own finds its true mate and grows braver and stronger than before. Nay, Lucia, bid me not leave thee. Thou art mine by all the rights of love."

"Dishonour me not!" she cried. "Only as a free man should you dare to utter such words to me. If ever the day come when as such you may approach me, return. Till then, farewell!"

She moved towards the door of an inner apartment, but he waylaid her:

"I will come as a free man, if you can show me how," he whispered. "I must have thee at any cost. How may it be done?"

Even she in whose wicked brain the vile scheme born of worldly ambition and sensual passion had long been hatching, hesitated now how to put it into words.

"It hath often been done before," she murmured. "'Tis so simple to place just a drop in a cup. There need be no pain, but merely a peaceful end such as we all desire."

"Nay!" cried Corso, with a sudden recoil from the horror of the deed, "never shall this hand perform such an act as that!"

"Forgive me," she said, turning the full beauty of her languorous eyes on him. "I had thought that in truth you desired your freedom, and this is the only way. Then, farewell, Corso, and farewell to love and joy for me."

A sob shook her form as again she turned to leave him. But once more he was at her side.

"Who is to place that fatal drop in the cup?" he whispered. "Much would I dare, and yet my hand might even at the last refuse so terrible a task."

"Mine would be willing," she answered quickly. "She is your wife after all, you are her husband, and as such some shrinking on your part is but natural. But what is she to me? No sacred tie binds us together; on the contrary, by all the laws of nature and of love she and I are already deadly enemies. To slay one's enemy is, after all, no such terrible crime! 'Tis considered a brave action if a man kill his, and may not a woman accomplish the same, though by different weapons? Leave it to me, Corso, my beloved. This hand shall free the man I love from the chains which bind him. It shall be my glorious privilege to be thus instrumental in thy progress towards the high destiny awaiting thee."

"Lucia! dost thou indeed dare all this for me?"

"More than this would I dare for thee," she answered, in low, caressing tones. "And now it but remains to settle details. Bid me to a banquet at thy house as soon as the period of thy mourning hath sufficiently expired, and leave the rest to me. And for the present, farewell."

Once more he sought to embrace her, but this time she held him back.

"So soon we can meet without dishonour," she whispered. "Let us wait until then."

And without pausing to analyse the nature of the honour that was to be secured by the act of cruel murder and treachery, Corso left her.

"The day is won!" she cried exultingly, when once

more alone. "I had hardly thought to gain my object thus easily. Everything gives way before me. My ambition and my love are within my grasp. Corso shall rule. With me to aid him, backed by his own power, what, indeed, can hinder him? Have not women before secured thrones by means of their beauty even when mated to one less worthy of occupying it than he? All will be gained when once the first step is taken, and the price—what? A clear drop which the apothecary hath promised to supply; and the result—freedom, love, and power!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE PLOT THICKENS

As Corso left the Bargello and proceeded towards the Donati Palace, his mind was in a ferment of excitement, in which his passion for Donna Lucia played the most prominent part. In his present mood the wild longing to possess the woman whose sensuous charm had enthralled him seemed to sweep every other consideration aside, and the rapture of knowing himself loved by her in return killed the voice of conscience and crushed all pangs of remorse for the crime, more heinous than any he had committed, to which he stood morally pledged. In the absorbed state of his mind he had not noticed the sound of footsteps hurrying to overtake him, and he was startled by a sudden sharp slap on his shoulder, and turned to find himself face to face with Rossellino della Tosa.

Corso had seen nothing of his brother-in-law since the night of Piccarda's funeral, and it was surely a strange and sinister fate which led him in the course of one afternoon to be accosted by the two persons who were playing the part of evil geniuses in his life. He trembled now at the sight of della Tosa as if caught in some guilty act, but probably it was less the pangs of remorse for the crime associated with him that caused him to do so

than a shrinking from anything which could seem to remind him of that better self awakened by his saintly sister's death, and to which the skilful hand of Lucia had so shortly before successfully administered an anodyne. For true it is that those higher instincts of our nature may still cause discomfort by a reminder of their presence when no longer strong enough to control our actions, and one of the temptations to continue on a downward course, arises from the fact that he who is wholly given to evil is spared much that can still torture the man to whom good is yet a possibility.

Corso had taken a terrible step lower down on the path of evil that day, but he had only reached the stage when the voice of his conscience was one to which he wished to close his ears, not that still lower depth when it would seem that she folds her wings and leaves the hardened sinner alone to his misdeeds.

"Hist! brother," said Rossellino, noticing his agitation, "surely thou hast naught to fear from me. I am not thy enemy, man. It was not thy fault if my bride left me a widower but a week after our nuptials, and in truth I bear thee no ill-will for it."

"I dreamt not that thou didst," said Corso, "but the sad occurrence hath left me somewhat nervous and apt to start at shadows. In truth the whole subject is one of great pain to me, and I would fain not speak of it more."

"It is not to talk of it that I sought thee," said Rossellino, walking on by his side. "What is once done cannot be undone, and it is of no use to weep over spilt milk. I loved Piccarda, I married her, and she died—well, many a better man than I has had no better luck,

and as for mine, it might have been worse, for she might just as easily have died ere ever we were wed. But a truce to this. Dost remember our conversation the night of thy feast when we agreed that the wedding should take place ? ”

Corso turned on him angrily.

“ Well do I remember it,” he said, “ and for what, I ask thee now, did I sacrifice my sister ? Instead of the power of this Friend of the People, this enemy of the nobles, being curbed, behold him at the zenith of success. His ordinances of so-called justice are formulated and announced. He himself is one of the Priors of the City, and in the course of a few days his ordinances will become law.”

Rossellino, ever cautious and wary as Corso was bold and impulsive, gave a furtive glance round. “ I like not to speak of these matters in the public way,” he whispered. “ Who knows where listening ears may be hidden near us ? If it pleases thee to let me accompany thee to thy own house, I will do so.”

A few minutes later, the two men were seated together in Corso's private room.

“ As regards this new ordinance of della Bella,” said della Tosa, in his quiet, even tone of voice, “ I had best tell thee straight, that to oppose it is the last thing I should do. That I have remained passive thus far is not from idleness, but from policy.”

“ How now,” said Corso hotly. “ Art thou then after all a traitor, that thou canst speak of favouring the schemes of this renegade ? ”

“ My good friend, thou goest ever too fast,” said della Tosa, calmly. “ Remember that speed alone never

yet won the race, and a blind man will be beaten in the first round, be he ever so swift, if there are obstacles in his way. Of a truth, I favour the schemes of this della Bella no more than thyself; but, as I endeavoured to show thee before, he will be a worse enemy to himself if given a free hand, than ever thou and I could be. Hast heard the provisions of this new enactment?"

"I have heard enough to know that all privileges are to be snatched from the nobles and Florence to be ruled by the mob," said Corso.

"True, the whole measure is, in fact, the most unjust law ever passed," said Rossellino. "Not only does it exclude the nobles from all office, all share in the government, but we are not even to be allowed out of our houses in the case of a disturbance. No noble is permitted to give evidence in court against one of the popolani, unless he has special leave from the Priors to do so—a leave which it will be taken good care is never accorded, for the Priors will, of course, be on the side of the people—and on the other hand, every act which the people choose to assume has been committed by a noble against one of themselves, is to be punished by the destruction of his house and property. Further, in order that these outrageous penalties should be enforced, a new officer, called the Gonfalonier of Justice—yea, of *Justice*, forsooth!—is to be appointed, and under him is to be a force of stonemasons, carpenters, and diggers, who will always be ready to answer a public summons and carry out his orders in the foul work of destruction. Such is the unjust measure which this so-called Friend of Justice would make law."

"A pest take this della Bella," cried Corso. "Are we thus to sit quietly aside and see him snatch all our privileges from us? Are we calmly to waive our rights and let the State be ruled by a howling mob? Surely not. Surely some means can be found to stop matters ere they come to this. Assassination hath done its work ere now to prevent lesser ills than this. Will no hand strike?"

"Were della Bella to be struck down to-night, every palace in Florence would be a smoking ruin ere morning," said Rossellino quietly. "As yet the populace worship him, and with the scum and rabble at his heels are mingled the better class citizen as well, the respectable tradespeople, the professional men, and superior artisans. A better weapon than the assassin's knife is to be found."

"Then what is it?" cried Corso, impatiently. "A poisoned draught? Nay, I meant not that," he added, with a sudden guilty start. "Poison hath been given to kings and emperors ere now. 'Tis too good a method for this low rascal."

"Neither the knife nor the cup will best rid us of him," said Rossellino. "His own handiwork will prove ere long to be the surest means of his undoing. Let his so-called Ordinances of Justice pass, let them become law, and Florence be governed by the lowest class of the populace, and what will be the result? Why, man alive, cannot you see? A state of anarchy will ensue; the so-called justice will prove itself bristling with grosser injustice than any that went before. The popolani grassi will soon perceive it and sicken of the rule of butchers and scavengers. If a palace or two be

burnt by way of penalty, so much the better (so long as it be neither yours nor mine), for it will serve as a further spark to the tinder of dissatisfaction. The people will soon split into two parties, and on whichever side della Bella ranges himself he will incur the bitter hatred of the other, while it were also no difficult matter to persuade the side he supports that he is in truth a traitor to it. Let him join the lowest class of the citizens, and they can be persuaded that he is at heart a noble, since he will undoubtedly be on the side of moderating their over-zeal; let him, on the other hand, take part with the better class of the people, it will be easy to show these that it is in truth he who is responsible for every evil that hath happened, since it is he who hath originally incited the mob and placed power in their hands by the framing of the new laws. Thus will he be caught in a trap whichever way he turns. But for all this, my friend, we must wait. The laws must first have time to work in the hands of the unprincipled mob to whom they are entrusted. We must give della Bella time to bring about his own downfall."

"In truth," cried Corso, convinced by the force of della Tosa's arguments, "thou hast the wisdom of a veritable Solomon, and the advantage of allowing this della Bella to make himself unpopular over that of making him a martyr to the popular cause, is clear. Yet I trust that, in the meantime, much evil will not be accomplished, nor that the day of the nobles will be long delayed."

"Patience, brother, patience," cautioned della Tosa once more. "The prize is worth waiting for, and when at last the day comes, as come it will, when our class

return to power, the opportunity will be thine. Seize it then with all the ardour of which thou art capable, and a higher place in the State than that ever yet held by one individual awaits thee."

CHAPTER XIV

THE LOVE POTION

THERE was to be a great feast in the Donati Palace, and already at an early hour of the day the whole house was in a state of stir and bustle. Donna Agnese had herself superintended the preparation of many of the dishes, and where she had not actually done so, most carefully minute directions had been given by her to the servants. The poor little lady had grown sadder and more subdued in the last few weeks. The shock of her husband's crime in abducting his sister from the Convent, and of Piccarda's subsequent marriage, illness, and death, had affected both her health and her spirits, and lately these had been still further disturbed by Corso's growing moroseness towards her. In vain she exerted all her little arts to soothe and please him, in vain she strove to dress herself becomingly, and for his sake to cast aside the burden of her melancholy. Corso treated her with less and less attention, and a growing repugnance to his wife's society was too pronounced to be ignored, even by eyes which sought to be blind. The true cause of this, however, did not reach Donna Agnese's ears, and, indeed, during all this time Corso and Lucia da Castro had so rarely met that even outside gossip, always eager for a scandal, had not yet openly coupled their names together.

The preparations were now ready, and in the great banquetting-hall the table shone resplendent with gold and silver plate, and costly fruit.

Donna Agnese was in her chamber, and two of her women were busy adorning her slight person in a stiff gold brocade, which made her appear even more pallid and melancholy than usual. But with all her efforts to have everything in readiness, the first guest had arrived before her toilet was completed.

"I am somewhat early, I fear," said Donna Lucia da Castro, as she stepped out of her litter and entered the main entrance. "Go, see if your mistress is yet ready to receive and I will await you here."

The retainer whom she addressed hesitated, but Donna Lucia sank into a chair near the entrance, and with a gesture which brooked no refusal bade him be gone. No sooner was she alone than it would seem that a sudden faintness overcame her. She pressed her hand to her heart and sank back in her seat with half closed eyes, through which, nevertheless, she managed to see into the great banquetting-hall to her right, and the figure of Roberto the scalso, or butler, busily engaged at the table. The minutes were meanwhile flying, and at any moment the servant might return, which would not suit Donna Lucia's plan at all. With her hand still pressed to her heart, and her eyes half closed, she tottered across the hall.

Roberto, hearing the sounds of someone approaching, raised his eyes in time to see a beautiful lady stand swaying as though about to fall in the doorway.

"Your Highness is ill," he cried in alarm, as he hastened to her succour.

With an effort the lady recovered herself and advanced into the room.

"Let me but rest for a minute," she said, passing her hand across her brow and moving, as she spoke, to the seat at the head of the table prepared for Donna Agnese. "I beseech thee raise no alarm. It is a mere passing indisposition, and I would on no account have any shadow cast by it over this feast, the first, I am told, to be held in this house since its period of mourning."

She suddenly dropped her head on her hands. "I am not yet fully recovered, I fear," she said, "a little wine would, I think, revive me. Good Roberto, pour me out but the merest taste."

The old man did as he was bid, and as she emptied the goblet he had presented to her, she appeared to revive.

"That is a very beautiful cup," she said, slowly examining a vessel near her, exquisitely wrought in repoussé silver and gold. "Is it not reserved for some specially honoured guest?"

"That is reserved for my mistress's own use," replied the old man. "It is the work of Messer Niccolò of Pisa, and is said to be of great value."

Lucia suddenly rose and approached nearer to the old man, all traces of her recent indisposition apparently gone.

"Roberto," she said, in an eager whisper, "is it true that you love your mistress and would fain do her a service?"

"Ay," said the old man, with a puzzled air, "the mistress is a good one to me, though, look you, there be mistresses and mistresses, and she is not a mistress of the first quality. I mean no offence."

"No, no, good Roberto, I know you do not. What you mean is just what I have heard. Your mistress no longer commands the same affection from the master as of old, is it not so?"

"That's as may be," said Roberto, edging a little from the lady and beginning to wish she would go and leave him to his accustomed duties, which did not include the answering of difficult and involved questions about his employer's private affairs.

"Yes, yes, Roberto. I see that you are a wise and discerning man. Now mark you, Roberto, 'tis in our power, yours and mine, to do this good mistress of yours a great service. Have you ever heard of a love potion? See, this is one." She held up a tiny phial containing a clear, colourless liquid as she spoke.

Roberto shook his head. "I know naught of love potions," he said. "Good looks and young blood—them's the best love potions, I reckon."

"Nay, but Roberto, 'tis just because this good lady Agnese is no longer very young nor very handsome that she needs help to retain her husband's affection. It is for this that love potions exist."

She rapidly emptied the tiny phial in the cup. "Now," she said, "if you will see that no one but Donna Agnese herself drinks out of her cup, that is, that she and no other drink the love potion I have placed there, I will give you ten golden florins."

"Ten golden florins!" said the old man, "'tis a large sum, and if indeed 'tis but to make Messer Corso love the mistress, I can see no great harm."

"There is no harm, of course," said Lucia, impatiently, "you will be doing both your master and mistress a

great service. But look you, Roberto, some people might object perchance to the thought of a love potion, so it were well to breathe no word of this. For me it would not matter, but punishment of a severe nature might fall on you, as a servant, for interfering in private matters. Swear that you will breathe no word of the potion being in the cup and I will give you ten florins more, twenty in all."

"Twenty florins! why, 'tis a fortune," gasped the astonished Roberto. "Why, for that 'twere worth while to promise anything."

"So I thought," said Lucia, drily, and drawing out a little bag from inside her drapery, she held some of its glittering contents before his eager gaze. "Ten florins I give you now, and the rest after the banquet," she said, "if you are faithful. I shall know at once if the potion is given or not, because these charms act rapidly, and before I leave the house Messer Corso's manner should have changed to thy mistress. And now I must join the assembly."

She rose as she spoke, but at the entrance to the hall she turned again for a minute to Roberto.

"Above all things see that no one but she taste the potion," she said, "or its effects are immediately lost."

Roberto gazed after her with a puzzled air as she walked from the room, then he returned to his table arrangements, carefully placing Niccolò Pisani's cup containing the love potion at his mistress's place.

"Twenty golden florins!" he murmured. "Well, the ways of folks are past my comprehension, but 'tis not I who place it in the cup, and if the lady likes to give it, what harm can be done? Twenty golden florins!

Who would think it could be worth her while ? " He raised the cup in his hand for a minute and regarded it reflectively. " I misdoubt her," he said. " I like not the deed. Yet, twenty golden florins ! 'Tis a fortune, a veritable fortune ! " and the cup was placed back on the board.

CHAPTER XV

AN INTERRUPTED BANQUET

IN the reception-room Lucia found herself in the presence of the Donati family. Donna Agnese rose to greet her, as she entered, moving stiffly in her heavy brocade, her faded homely countenance affording a striking contrast to the dark brilliant beauty, and well-proportioned figure of her guest.

Behind her stood Corso, his handsome face striving in vain to assume the careless happy expression suitable for the occasion. He greeted Lucia with formality and withdrew to a distant window, leaving his wife to present her two sons, Filippo, as usual somewhat dreamy, but ever courteous, if cold, in his manner, and Simone, the handsome, dashing youth, whose bold eager countenance proclaimed his readiness to take active part in whatever chanced, whether feast or fight, with a heart which would trouble itself but little with the after consequences of either.

Donna Lucia greeted both with easy grace, and turned to their mother with a pretty compliment, which touched her weakest spot and brought a faint blush of pride to her pale cheek.

In truth, the personal gifts and appearances of both the youths who stood by her side might well bring a

pardonable glow to a mother's heart; yet Lucia's observant eye noticed that it was on the more refined, but less strikingly handsome features of her first-born that Agnese's glance rested with the fondest expression.

And now other guests began to arrive. Forese Donati, gay and debonair as ever, but turning eyes of affection and pride on his fair wife Giovanna, or Nella, as she was more familiarly called, whose modest dress and carefully covered bosom were a contrast to the usual style of dress prevalent at that time*; Manetto Donati, a cousin to Forese and Corso, with his young daughter Gemma, who was shortly to unite the Donati family with that of the Alighieri by her marriage with Dante of that house; and following them, Donna Agnese's brother, Vieri dei Cerchi, who, awkward and plebeian in appearance, greeted his sister with a rough, but genuine expression of affection, to which she gave a pleased response. Guido Cavalcanti also came, for the feud which was later to divide him from the Donati family, and more especially from Corso, was as yet but smouldering; and Frescobaldi, that sworn enemy of della Bella, whose quarrel with the nobles was said by some to date from an insult paid to him by Frescobaldi. Others still followed, and in the bustle of these arrivals Lucia contrived to glide to the side of Corso, whose dejected and uneasy expression filled her own intrepid spirit with alarm.

"Wear not so gloomy a countenance," she whispered to him. "All will be well if thou canst but act as though it were. Behold my courage, though 'tis I who hath the more cause to falter."

But Corso tried in vain to turn his eye on his wife

* See Dante, *Pur.* xxiii., p. 93.

with the same unconcerned indifference as usual. Even with the alluring charm of Lucia by his side, even with this reminder of the object to be attained by that day's dark deed, he could not bring himself to look on the unsuspecting countenance of Donna Agnese without some thrill of horror. A sudden access of remorse swept over him, and bending to his partner in guilt, he whispered back :

"Is it too late? Can no other means be found—in the privacy of her chamber perchance—not before others at the festive board."

"It is too late," she said, hurriedly, and not without a suspicion of contempt in her voice. "All is arranged. There is really nothing for you to do. Coward, would you fail before a woman?"

She moved from him as she ended this speech, anxious not to be seen too long in conversation with him, and soon the door was thrown open and Roberto announced that the banquet was served.

And now, as the guests all took their seats at the board, a fear suddenly seized Lucia. Supposing that the fatal drop placed by her hands in Donna Agnese's cup had, after all, been removed by Roberto or one of the other servants. Was the cup in exactly the spot where she had seen it? So it seemed to her, but how could she tell for a certainty that it had not been moved?

"You do not eat, fair lady," said the voice of her neighbour, Forese Donati.

"I prefer conversation to food," she replied, pulling herself together with an effort, "and as yet Messer Forese, reputed to be one of the first wits of Florence, and a poet to boot, hath given me no proof of either."

"In truth," he replied, delicately tearing with his fingers a wing of a stuffed lark in front of him, "if you but taste this dainty dish, you will speedily admit that no poor wit of mine is worth considering when you can be so much better employed. But one thing is needed to complete the satisfaction it affords me, and that is a good draught of red wine to wash it down. It seems to me that Roberto is somewhat slack in his duties. No beverage has yet made its appearance."

In his seat at the head of the table, Corso overheard these words, which, indeed, his brother had purposely said in a raised tone of voice, and Lucia's heart beat anxiously as she saw an increasing pallor on his countenance.

Determined to shorten the suspense so terrible to both, and to prevent any possibility of Corso stopping everything in some sudden access of remorse, she added her voice to Forese's. "I, too, am somewhat parched," she said, in a clear tone of voice which she knew would reach Corso's ear. "The day is warm methinks, and makes me thirsty. I feel no appetite until I have tasted wine."

"There! Corso," said Forese, turning to his brother, "even the ladies are pining for your wine. Why delays Roberto to bring it?"

Thus brought to bay, Corso could do naught but call in loud tones to Roberto to bring the wine; yet Lucia, watching him keenly, though furtively, trembled to see the perspiration break out on his brow and his hands convulsively clutch the arms of his chair, as his servant obeyed.

The wine was brought first to Corso, and after Roberto

had himself tasted it, as was the custom of the day, it was passed round.

Twice did Lucia, with angry eyes, watch her host try to raise his own goblet to his lips, and twice did his shaking hand refuse its task. She glanced rapidly round the table to see if others besides herself had perceived his agitation, and found to her relief that all seemed occupied with their food or in light conversation, until her eyes fell at last on the big, boorish countenance of Agnese's brother, Vieri dei Cerchi. He was sprawling on his seat with the uncouth attitudes habitual with him, but Lucia was concerned to note that he seemed neither to be eating nor drinking, and that his eyes were fixed, first on Corso and then still more intently on Agnese. Lucia could no longer keep her own eyes away from the latter. Her goblet was now filled with wine, but so far she had not raised it to her lips, and yet, unless the apothecary from whom she had bought her fatal drug had deceived her, but one good draught from the mixture would be enough to do its work. But now it suddenly occurred to Lucia with horror, that she had forgotten to ascertain the exact time which it would take for the poison to act. In the course of a few hours, so she was told, all would be over, but would the first deadly symptoms appear as soon as the draught was tasted? She had not faced this question before, but now she hoped sincerely it would not. Even her nerve began to shrink from the thought of a public scene. Would the cup never be raised? Still Agnese toyed with her food, and exchanged remarks with Manetto Donati, and Messer Frescobaldi, who sat one on either side of her. But it was Forese at last who, all unconsciously, brought about the fatal issue. His

own cup had already been replenished more than once, and he had reached the stage of jovial good-humour preceding the first incoherencies of intoxication.

"A toast!" he cried, holding up his goblet. "Who joins in a toast? I love a toast. Here's to our hostess. Here's to Donna Agnese."

He drained his cup, and in response Agnese raised hers and took a good draught. Then, replacing it on the table, she turned to Manetto and began to discuss with him the future of Simone.

"His father says he will make a great position for himself," she said, "and that he is bound to distinguish himself in politics or warfare. Would it were the former. We women dread the battle for our dear ones. Yet in these days all needs must fight——"

She turned suddenly pale and raised her hand to her breast. A fiery pain seemed to scorch through her.

Manetto lifted his eyes at her abrupt pause, and was startled at her changed countenance.

"I fear you are indisposed," he said with concern.

"'Tis not the fever, I hope, or an ague such as is so prevalent in Rome."

"'Tis naught," she answered with an effort, "a sudden pain and dizziness only."

A lull came in the conversation. By one of those magnetic currents which often convey to an assembly that something is wrong, the other guests had become aware that Donna Agnese was suffering.

"The sun may have caused it," said Donna Lucia, who had overheard Agnese's words. "I myself was seized with a somewhat similar attack when first I arrived here this evening, but a draught of your good

wine, kindly furnished by the scalso, speedily set me right."

"Try another drink of the wine, dear lady," said Manetto, seizing the suggestion and holding her goblet to her lips. "It will doubtless help you to overcome the faintness."

"Indeed, I am already better," she replied, trying to smile, and she took the goblet from him. "My friends, I entreat you do not cease your merry-making on my account. 'Tis so passing an ailment, though one to which I am unaccustomed. Thank you, good cousin," she added, and took the proffered cup from his hand. This time she nearly emptied it, but as she replaced it on the table, an expression of alarm appeared in her eyes.

"I know not what hath happened," she said, hurriedly. "I like not this wine. 'Tis of a strange fiery bitterness towards the dregs. Ah!——"

A sudden convulsion seized her and she fell face forward.

But ere the consternation and dismay of the other guests had had time to express themselves, Vieri dei Cerchi had sprung to his feet, for once prompt in speech and action.

"I, too, like not this wine, brother Corso," he cried fiercely. "Methinks it were well if the drink of thy providing were tasted, not only from the bottle but in each cup. Give me the goblet from which my sister hath drunk and let us see thee drink of it thyself."

He stretched out his hand as he spoke, but at the very moment when he would have seized the goblet, his purpose was frustrated. With one swift gliding movement Donna Lucia had sprung to the assistance of her stricken

hostess, and now an awkward movement of her beautiful arm sent it spinning on the floor, where its few remaining contents ran in a crimson stream across the white marble.

The accident, however, passed almost unnoticed in the general confusion that followed. Donna Agnese's illness was evidently of too serious a nature for the banquet to be continued, and the frightened guests left their seats and crowded together in consternation.

The sufferer had but recovered from the terrible convulsion which had shaken her to sink back livid and unconscious, while round her gathered a little group of those who had hastened to her succour, trying in vain by chafing her hands, and holding strong aromatic essences to her nostrils, to restore her. Foremost among them was Filippo, his brows contracted with anxiety, his face pale with so absorbing a dread, that his uncle Vieri's words had passed unheeded by him. Surely, if aught could have restored animation to that stricken form, it would have been the whispered words of entreaty from those lips, the touch of those hands which, as an infant's, had pressed her bosom. But suddenly, as he raised his eyes, Filippo encountered those of Donna Lucia, who supported his mother on the other side, and as they did so some sinister influence seemed to pass to him, and he dropped the hand he held and turned away.

"It is useless," said Lucia, at the same moment placing on the table a cup of cold water from which she had made a futile effort to give Donna Agnese a drink.

"Were it not well," she added, seeking Corso with her eyes, "to summon Donna Agnese's women and bid them bear her to her chamber? I greatly fear that she is sorely stricken."

The clear, incisive tones of her voice roused Corso, who stood apart, powerless apparently to act or move. With all his heart he thanked Lucia for the suggestion, which at least made action possible, and in a few minutes the women of the household drew near, terrified yet curious, and a trusty messenger was despatched for the nearest apothecary.

And thus the suffering form of the lady of the house was borne to her chamber, which she was never more to leave, and over the banqueting-hall, which late had been a scene of brilliant gaiety, hung a silence as of death. No attempt was made by either Corso or his sons to persuade the guests to remain, and one by one they quietly took their leave, receiving a formal and mechanically given salute from their host as they passed him. Donna Lucia was one of the first to go. The strain of the last hour had been almost more than even she could endure longer, and the conventional words she had schooled herself to utter, died away from her pale lips, as she raised her eyes to Corso's haggard countenance.

But one guest, and one alone, broke that oppressive stillness, and as Vieri dei Cerchi passed his brother-in-law, he flung aside the proffered hand and whispered hoarsely, "If my sister die, her death be at thy door. Look to thyself then, Messer Barone, and count no member of the Cerchi house as thy friend."

Corso accepted the insult with an incriminating silence, but from that hour there sprang an enmity between his house and the Cerchi, which was to be the cause of much bloodshed and strife, and to last as long as the lives of the two heads of their houses lasted.

CHAPTER XVI

A DEATH-BED

"HER HIGHNESS would fain speak with you, my Lord," were the words which fell at first with a dull unmeaning echo on the ears of Corso, as two hours later he sat alone in his room. Only when the servant had twice repeated them did he rouse himself sufficiently to take in the meaning.

Agnese, then, was better, was the first thought they prompted. Perhaps, after all, the poison was going to fail, and she would be restored from her deadly sickness. A feeling of relief came over him. Now that the deed was done he did not wish his victim to die, and yet, had Donna Agnese indeed recovered, he would have been ready on the morrow to lend himself to some other wicked scheme for her destruction. But Donna Agnese was not going to recover. The sight of the apothecary's solemn countenance, the weeping and wailing of the women watching in the ante-room, all warned Corso that his summons meant no improvement in her condition. With slow, reluctant footsteps he followed the messenger to the very door of the death chamber. He had never contemplated this as part of the hideous result of his crime. It had not occurred to him that he must needs confront his murdered victim as the solemn hour of her death drew nigh, that, prompted by the affection she had entertained towards him who stood to her

in the closest of earthly relationships, she would seek the consolation of his support and presence in that last dread hour.

None would have recognised Corso Donati now as the intrepid leader who, in defiance of orders, had plunged into the thick of the fight at Campaldino. It were indeed easier to him to have faced a whole army of the enemy's forces, than to stand alone in the presence of the one weak woman who awaited him beyond the closed door. The perspiration stood in great beads on his forehead, and his knees shook under him as with the ague.

The waiting woman, who had been watching over her mistress, opened the door to him.

"Delay not, my lord," she whispered as he entered. "The end draws very near."

She withdrew softly to the other apartment, and Corso approached the bedside alone.

Donna Agnese was lying propped up with great silk cushions, whose bright colouring intensified the deathly hues of her own countenance. She appeared very small, in the centre of the great four-poster, with its heavy hangings and elaborately carved woodwork.

Her eyes were closed as Corso entered the room, and her brows contracted as if in great pain, but as he drew slowly nearer to her, she turned her head in his direction.

"My lord," she said, feebly.

Corso sank on his knees by the bedside. "Agnese," he whispered, hoarsely, "thou art better, art thou not? The pain hath left thee."

"The pain hath left, but better, no," she said. "I grow numb and cold; soon all will be over."

"Nay," he muttered, "thou wilt soon be well."

Her hands moved restlessly on the sheets, but she gave no other sign of having heard what he said.

"Corso," she said at last, "I was never good at speaking. I have not the gifts of those nobly born, but in my poor way I have loved thee as devotedly as wife could. I want to tell thee not to mourn—it is best so—I was in thy way—thou wilt marry someone else more fitted for thee—how could I expect thee to love me—yet my sons did. They overlooked my failings."

Corso tried in vain to speak, the lying words of affection died away in his throat. It seemed that his tongue could not grow vile enough to utter what his brain dictated. And yet in the eyes turned towards him there was a pathetic agony of hope which he could not face. The tender, faithful heart only asked for the one word of love ere it ceased to beat, and on that word his own crime had set a seal which he tried in vain to break. He had murdered her, and broken her heart, yet there was this saving grace in him that he could not in this solemn hour kneel as a lying hypocrite by her side.

"I have been a bad husband," he stammered.

Perhaps it was the best thing he could have said. The remorse which she heard, or fancied she heard in the words, turned Donna Agnese's mind from the bitter desolation of her disappointment. She almost forgot that the token for which she yearned had not been given in her pity for what he suffered.

"Nay, not that, my lord," she said, as eagerly as failing strength allowed.

"'Tis I who have failed, I, who was never brilliant nor beautiful enough to be thy wife. Nay, grieve not,

dear husband," for an uncontrollable sob shook Corso's strong frame. "In truth, I am weary of this life; do not begrudge me the rest for which I long."

A sudden wave of despair swept over Corso's soul and overwhelmed him. The horror of his deed had never so fully occurred to him as now that the words of tender, unselfish affection, came from the lips of his murdered wife, and he was seized with an access of terror at the thought of the awful punishment that must be reserved in the next world, so far and yet so near to the mediæval mind, for so great a crime as his. Selfish even in his better feelings, the overwhelming desire took possession of him to obtain pardon from his wife's lips ere her spirit fled to the world where its prayers might yet avail him on earth. That the knowledge could but add to the dying woman's agony he did not pause to consider. He must pour out his confession and relieve his own soul at whatever cost to hers.

"Agnese," he cried, "hear me. Thou dost not dream how wicked I have been. I have sinned a most deadly sin against thee. I am worse, far worse, than thou couldst ever imagine. For I am thy murderer. True, it was not my own hand which mixed the draught that has slain thee, but I consented, I knew——"

Some slight sound from the dying woman caused him to stop suddenly and raise his eyes towards her. The head had fallen forward, the eyes were vacant. "Agnese, speak! Agnese—help, help!" he cried. But when, in response, the apothecary and women reached the bedside, Agnese had breathed her last.

Whether she had heard his confession, and whether, having heard, she had with her parting breath forgiven

him, or whether the agony caused by the discovery of his perfidy had hastened her end, Corso never knew.

When it was quite evident that all was over, and his presence of no further avail in the chamber of death, Corso fled from it as one distraught, and shut himself in his own room.

Some hours later a knock, which seemed to demand admittance, was heard at the door, and on opening it, Corso found himself confronted with the pale countenance of Filippo, on which sorrow and something deeper than ordinary grief, had already set their mark.

"Father," he cried, in accents of the deepest agitation, "my mother's death must be inquired into. She died not from natural causes. Thou wilt seek the murderer without delay, wilt thou not? And let not her death pass a needless hour unavenged."

"What wouldst thou?" cried Corso, angrily. "This is some wild idea bred of grief alone. The apothecary can give thee the cause of her death."

"I have sought him, but he will say naught," said Filippo. "His answers are vague and uncertain. That he, too, suspects more than he cares to say is evident. I beseech thee make the inquiry with all speed."

"Am I not allowed an hour for the indulgence of my own grief in private?" said Corso. "What avail is an inquiry since thy mother is dead, and all the enquiries in the world could not restore her to life?"

"Then," said Filippo, hoarsely, "I am to understand that no inquiry will be made, that thou wilt take no steps to avenge my mother's death?"

"Thy mother died of a sudden chill. Such cases are common enough," replied Corso. "Now leave me, I

command. I would fain not be disturbed, and as for this idea of revenge for a crime that has not been committed, 'tis but a part of thy foolish youthfulness to talk of it."

Unable to bear more, he pushed Filippo from the room as he spoke, and slammed the door heavily behind him. For one moment the youth stood petrified; then a wave of wild grief at his father's apparent indifference swept over him.

"If thou wilt not, then mine be the task," he said, gazing at the closed door with clenched hands. "If the husband refuse to act, then 'tis for the eldest son to do so. Mine be the task to avenge."

CHAPTER XVII

AN AWFUL VOW

IN front of the high altar in the private chapel of the Donati Palace, all that remained on earth of Donna Agnese was laid in state to await burial. The walls and the altar itself were draped in heavy black, and the great wax lights placed at each corner of the bier alone relieved the surrounding gloom.

At the foot of the bier knelt the figure of a young man. His face was buried in his hands, his shoulders bent, and his whole attitude indicative of the most profound grief. Suddenly he rose and, walking to the head of the coffin, bent over the still uncovered face of the corpse.

The homely features were wrapt in the quiet majesty of death. A dignity and beauty which they had not known in life stamped them now in this, their last, long sleep. But the hand of death had intensified rather than smoothed the pathetic lines about the mouth, and the expression of gentle pleading which had lately grown habitual to it.

"Mother, mother!" cried the young man, for it was the figure of Agnese's eldest son which mourned over her bier, "would that I knew who had done thee this wrong, that I might avenge it. Here, before God's altar, do I vow, that should thy murderer ever be brought to light this hand shall lay him low, even as thou art laid low now."

Choked by passionate emotion, he bent again over the beloved remains in silence.

Surely the gentle countenance of her who in life had ever sought for peace was pleading with him now. If so, he heeded it not in the tempest of bitter wrath and grief which shook his soul.

"The duty which my father with wicked selfishness evades, I, the firstborn, shall take on me in his place," he continued. "To discover thy murderer shall be the first charge of my soul, the first aim of my life. Until that sacred task be fulfilled, I shall know no rest, nor joy, nor peace."

He paused awhile. The sweet, steadfast face of Leonora seemed to be gazing at him through a mist of tears. In his heart he knew that the terrible vow he had made must stand like a cruel dividing wall between his soul and hers, and the thought of this broke in waves of agony in his heart.

But there was a deeper drop in his cup awaiting him than any he had yet tasted, and, in the first torture of realizing that he could know no love of woman until he had freed himself from his vow, he was as yet unconscious of the full horror of what he had undertaken.

For, so far, it had not entered Filippo's mind to connect Corso with the murder of Agnese. His father's apparent disinclination to avenge it had seemed to his son but in keeping with the growing indifference of Corso for his wife, and had on this account alone filled his soul with wrath and indignation. Further than that, his mind had refused to go, recoiling with instinctive self-defence from the horror of what lay beyond. For

it is the truths that have the power to strike to the very roots of our being which we are often the last to perceive ourselves.

It had not at this time occurred to him for one instant that his father sought to replace his mother by anyone else, and in his youthful impetuosity he had not attempted to enquire into the possible motive for the crime. Murders in high life, especially from poison, were not so uncommon then as to excite great wonder, and to the simple mediæval mind of Filippo, the murder alone was the fact of paramount importance.

In the disturbed state of politics and of society generally, a motive would not be difficult to seek, and he imagined that some enemy of his father's had done the deed.

Once more Filippo knelt by the side of the coffin preparatory to his departure, but ere he rose from his knees, he was conscious that a curtain at the further side of the chapel was being gently moved, and the next moment he knew that he was no longer alone.

Irritated and annoyed at other eyes seeing him in this sacred moment of grief, he rose angrily to his feet to find himself face to face with his uncle, Vieri dei Cerchi.

"How came you here?" he asked, in some confusion. "I gave orders that I was not to be disturbed."

"Have I not also a right to mourn the dead who was of my own kin, and very dear to me?" replied his uncle, fixing grave, but kind eyes on the young man's countenance, which still bore the traces of the emotion through which he had lately passed.

"I bade the watchers to let me through, for I would fain see thee, and knew that my sister's son would not

deny me the privilege of mourning by her bier. Alas ! that ever the fatal feast took place. And yet," he added, bending over the corpse, "thou wast doomed. Had the cup failed, would not the dagger have been ready ? If the dagger had not struck home other means were surely found to hasten thy sweet soul from this earth. Ah ! woe is me ! "

Filippo clutched his uncle's arm in a feverish grip.

"Thou, too, art convinced of foul play," he said, eagerly.

Instead of answering, Vieri remained with his eyes fixed on the corpse for a few seconds in silence.

"Would that thy son could avenge thy death," he suddenly broke out. "He is the fitting person, yet how were vengeance possible for him ? "

"How not ? " said Filippo. "If I be young in years, I am old in heart and mind. The blood of both the Cerchi and Donati flows hot in my veins, and here by my murdered mother's corpse have I vowed a sacred vow to try to track her murderer, and, once discovered, by this right hand shall he be slain."

But to his amazement his uncle's eyes were turned to him with an expression in which approval sought to struggle with some horrifying sense of dismay.

"Hast verily vowed this ? " he gasped at length. "Hast in truth taken this sacred oath here at God's altar and by thy sainted mother's corpse ? Alas ! rash youth, thou knowest not what thou hast done. Sacrilege and a broken oath await thee on the one hand, and on the other—how can this tongue tell thee what ? "

"Nay, speak, I entreat thee," said Filippo, trembling

with a sense of overwhelming, though undefined apprehension. "To an honourable man, at least, there can be no alternative worse than the breaking of such a solemn vow as mine."

"Thou hast a brave and noble spirit," said Vieri, "yet even it may well flinch before that to which all unwittingly thou hast pledged thyself, and perchance the weight of a broken oath on thy soul may be less heavy than the sin of parricide."

Filippo recoiled before the sudden shock of the word.

"Nay, say not that," he whispered, recovering himself with an effort, and raising eyes filled with agony to his uncle's face.

"Say not that! Thou art surely mistaken. Thou hast never loved my father and art carried away now by some passion against him. He hath his faults, of course, and in a sudden access of violence might commit some desperate deed—but to poison his own wife, my mother——"

Vieri gazed at him compassionately.

"Proof, it is true, I have not," he said, "yet my own instinct, coupled with much I observed, leaves little room for doubt. If thou canst clear thy father's name from the suspicion, it were well for thee to do so, but until thou canst bring absolute proof that he is guiltless, I for my part shall believe him guilty."

The young man's countenance had grown even paler and more drawn during the last few minutes, and now a set purpose of some terrible nature seemed engraven on it. Standing erect at the foot of his mother's coffin, he laid one hand upon it and faced his uncle.

"Here once more by this sacred corpse I renew my

oath," he said in unfaltering accents. "Here do I solemnly vow that if the murderer be discovered, this right hand, which I now lay on my murdered mother, shall strike at him, even if he be my own father, and meanwhile the one aim and object of my life shall be to discover the truth, so that if, after all, my father be innocent, I may clear his name; if guilty, I may strike at him as I have said."

"To thee do I leave this awful duty," said Vieri, "both in consideration of thy kinship to the victim and of the oath thou hadst sworn ere I reached thee. Yet here do I also solemnly swear before God and His Saints, that if thy hand fail, mine will strike, and that the man whose hand slew my sister shall himself be slain. Here do I also swear that whether Corso Donati be the murderer or not, for his neglect and ill-treatment of my sister, and his refusal to avenge her death, I never more enter his house, nor eat of his bread, nor touch his hand in good fellowship. From this day we are no longer brothers even in name, but deadly enemies. It shall be my aim to oppose and thwart him at every turn, for, mark you," here he again laid a heavy hand on the young man's shoulder, "this crime has been committed, I am convinced, from political motives. Your father seeks, as you will soon see, an alliance better calculated to further his ambitious designs than the one with my sister has done. It shall be my task to prevent him at every step from reaping the unholy advantages of this evil act."

"And mine too," said Filippo. "If this guilt be never brought home to him, at least it may be my privilege to watch his career, and for my dead mother's sake,

to prevent her murder from furthering his advancement. If he should marry again, I will devote my life to opposing any political advantages that such a union may bring. At least he shall never step to power on a path stained with this sacred blood."

He bent and kissed the corpse once more, then hurriedly left the chapel.

CHAPTER XVIII

A DARK DESTINY

IN the midst of the dark passions which had claimed Filippo's soul when his vow of vengeance had been taken, the thought of all he was renouncing had been but as a tender, distant dream. The joys of love and of domestic happiness had been as a glimpse of some far-off sunlit shore to a man fighting for his life in the midst of an angry, raging sea. Leonora seemed something too remote from the tragedy in which he was plunged to have an active part in it. But when calmer moments came, his tortured heart awoke to the consciousness of love and of having lost it, and with it came the realization that no time must be wasted before bidding Leonora farewell. To link that pure, bright presence with his own storm-tossed destiny would be impossible to him now. The woman he loved should not be dragged down to share the future of gloom and of dark deeds which must henceforth be his, but in the consciousness that he was sacrificing her, as well as himself, lay his severest pang. For it was impossible to have loved Leonora without realising something of what this blow would be to her own loving, steadfast spirit. But before he sought an interview with her, he strove to find some evidence as to his mother's murder. Until he had done this he clung still to the hope, vain though in his heart he felt

it to be, that some other hand than Corso's had administered the poison, and he endeavoured to blind himself to the conviction, which had come like a lightning flash on his soul with his uncle's words. All that he could discern, however, but added confirmation to his suspicion, since it seemed that no one from outside had had opportunity of tampering with the wine.

Old Roberto, terrified beyond measure at the appalling events which he could not fail to connect with the love potion, swore that no one had had access to the wine which had been under his personal charge, and fears for his own safety, if the truth were to be discovered, sealed his lips as to Lucia's actions.

He had, moreover, the foresight thoroughly to cleanse the goblet from which Agnese had drunk directly the guests had left the banqueting-hall, and at the same time so carefully to wipe up what had been spilt on the floor that not a trace remained. Filippo, however, was forced to the conclusion that the poison had been administered by his father before the banquet, though by some miscalculation it took effect thus in public.

Possibility of actual proof as to his guilt seemed remote, but to Filippo it did not appear impossible. In some yet undiscovered way he felt a conviction which was to become almost a superstition before long, that he was destined to be his mother's avenger, and that therefore the proof of the crime were bound eventually to reach him. Meanwhile his soul was pledged to circumvent any results that might be advantageous to the murderer. No brooding, no thinking could alter the fact that he was a man doomed to live apart, and that Leonora and he must say farewell unless some chance, which he felt to

be too remote seriously to consider, should release him from his vow.

Leonora, who had meanwhile wondered at her lover's absence, put it down to his bereavement and to possible business arrangements connected with the funeral, and if her heart suggested that even in the midst of this it was unlike him to stay away entirely, she at once put the thought from her, and reminded herself that her belief in Filippo was absolute and that no outside appearances could matter. But two days after the funeral of Agnese, which had been celebrated with the customary pomp, Filippo appeared. In spite of his mourning and of all that had befallen since they had last met, Leonora could not suppress a cry of joy and relief when she saw him. With eager face and outstretched hands she advanced to within touch of him and then suddenly shrank back with an instinctive sense of chill horror.

In truth, the man who stood before her seemed too much changed to be the one whose love she had held but a week before. The tender eyes now burned with a sombre fire; the brow, on which an exalted aspiration had seemed to set its mark, was gloomy and overcast, the mouth which had been gentle, though firm, was tightly closed, while lines of agony seemed to have engraven themselves at its corners. But it was more than any actual change of feature or expression, more than the white, set face and darkly-gleaming eyes, which held Leonora, as it were, spell-bound. That indefinable atmosphere, which we are all conscious of more or less in others, and to which love renders us peculiarly sensitive, filled her heart now with icy dismay.

It was to her as though an apparition only of Filippo

had come back to her, and an apparition from which the soul was absent, or, worse still, replaced by another.

For a moment these two, who had been so closely united by the warm atmosphere of mutual love, stood gazing at each other, as though across an impenetrable barrier.

Filippo at length broke the silence.

"Touch me not, draw not nearer to me, Leonora," he said. "You do well to keep back. This is the last time I shall trouble your path. I have come but to bid you farewell."

But still her lips refused to speak, her feet seemed powerless to move. She stood gazing at this changed figure of the man she loved with silent lips and strained, enquiring eyes.

"I need not attempt explanation," he continued. "Evidently I bear the marks of my destiny on me plainly enough for you to see at once that our parting is decreed."

Then, at last, words broke from her. "What mean you, Filippo? What mean you? Are you mad?" she asked.

In truth, it seemed to her puzzled brain that such an explanation could alone account for this appalling change in his attitude.

"Would I were," he groaned. "Nay, Leonora, I am sane enough. It is that which bids me part from thee. Were I truly mad, I might perhaps even now ask you to share my destiny. As it is, farewell."

"Explain what you mean, for heaven's sake," she whispered. "Do me at least the grace to tell me what has occurred to turn your heart from me."

"Destiny," he said. "I am a man doomed to a life

in which the dear delights of love, of a wife's devotion, and the joy of children, may not enter. The curse upon me I must bear alone. Ask not to know more. It would but add to your pain. Farewell ! "

Slowly he turned, and as he did so she watched him with a face which seemed frozen. But suddenly, as he reached the door, a quiver passed across her features and with a rush all her passionate love for him, the full depths of which she had not herself realized until this moment of parting, swept over her in a flood. It would seem as if a bolt was shot back opening the secret recesses of her nature, and realising all the pent up love and tenderness which dwelt there.

The next moment she was clinging to him with eager hands, while his face was raised to his aglow with love, and quivering with entreaty.

" Filippo, Filippo ! " she cried, " leave me not. Do you forget how I love you ? Would you break my heart ? Give me at least one word of love ere you go. Leave me one kind glance, one loving sign to cherish through the blank years without you. Filippo, my love, my love ! "

Gently Filippo raised her in his arms, and as he held her to him for one moment in a close embrace, his love swept over him with a force which cast everything else aside, and he was conscious of it alone.

His gentler mood fell like healing balm on Leonora's soul. She still clung to him, but a calmness followed her recent stormy outburst, and she yielded to the soothing sense of his strong arms round her.

" My own ! my star, my angel ! " murmured Filippo, bending over her and pressing passionate kisses on her hair and brow, though, even now, something in the innate

purity of Leonora's soul kept in his love the reverential element which had always been there for her, and held the full ardour of his passion in check.

She raised her clear eyes to him, and with one hand smoothed his brow.

"It has gone, has it not?" she whispered, smiling softly.

"The terrible mood which divided us has gone for ever, has it not? You are again my Filippo, my dear one, whose love nothing can take from me."

At her words, Filippo again awoke to the remembrance of his destiny, and with it also came a full realization of what he was renouncing. For a moment he hesitated, and there swept across his soul the temptation to take advantage of Leonora's love and let her link her fate to his; but again the nobler side of his nature rebelled against such a course, and recoiled from the sin of bringing the shadow of his vengeance on that pure spirit and from staining her unborn children with the shadow of a father's crime.

But to renounce Leonora when his mind was consumed with other passions than love, and to renounce her now when all her womanly beauty and charm were before him, and when her own love for him was enveloping them both with its delicate, exquisite passion, were very different matters. With an effort which seemed to tear at his very life, he cast her gently from him.

"Listen, Leonora," he said, leading her to a couch near by, and seating himself at a little distance. "The words I spoke just now were not the outcome of a hasty mood, they were, on the contrary, wrung from the purpose of my life. In that life a happy home, a woman's love can

have no share. To the course which I have chosen, dark and terrible though it be, I have pledged myself by an irrevocable vow."

"What vow?" she asked. "Surely, it is no righteous one which hath thus cast thy spirit into blackest gloom."

"I will tell thee," he said. "Leonora, my mother's death was due to no natural cause. Of this I am convinced, and so is my uncle, her brother, who believes that some foul hand mixed deadly poison in her cup."

He paused, and Leonora made no comment, but her face was very pale and she stretched out her hand to him in a mute gesture of sympathy.

"To avenge that great wrong, to avenge my mother's death, I have pledged myself by a solemn and sacred vow, and moreover, I have pledged myself to stand in the way of the murderer's advancement until the hour to strike shall come."

There was a pause, but to Leonora's soul, vibrating in passionate response to every emotion in that of her lover, there was the knowledge that he still concealed some terrible truth from her. At last her pale lips framed the question which they would fain not have asked if she could have found peace in ignorance of the truth.

"Who is the one whose act thou seekest to avenge, whose path thou hast vowed to watch?" she asked.

"I will tell you even that," he made reply. "If you desire to know, it is perhaps your due that no part of the truth should be hidden."

"Any pain is better," she murmured, "than to remain in a darkness which hides your soul from mine."

"Know then," he went on, "that if my suspicions and

those of my uncle are true, the hour which makes me my mother's avenger will make me at the same time the slayer of my father. Ere I had thought of this awful possibility was my vow taken."

"But you can then be absolved from it," she said eagerly, raising her white face to him. "Such a vow cannot be binding on your soul."

He shook his head.

"There can be no absolution for me from the vow," he said. "I do not even wish to be released. My mother's death must be avenged though my own father be her murderer; and even after I knew the suspicions of my uncle and realized how well founded they were I deliberately renewed my oath. Ah, Leonora, now that you know all do you not feel you do well to shrink from me?"

But even as he spoke she was at his side clinging to him with tenderly imploring arms, all her woman's nature stooping to him with that humility which is love's greatest pride.

"Filippo, Filippo, my beloved," she whispered, "my heart aches for the heaviness of the burden that rests upon you. Let me, as your faithful, loving wife, try to share and to lighten the load. To me no pain, however great, if shared with you, can be so great as that of separation."

With a gentle but firm gesture Filippo put her from him, for again the fierce temptation to let her share his destiny swept over his soul, and her soft, caressing touch was almost more than he could bear.

"What you ask is impossible," he groaned, as he paced the floor with restless footsteps. "The terrible barrier which stood between us when first we met to-day would

rise up again and be like a dividing knife between our souls."

"My love would break it down," she whispered.

"Nay, tempt me not," he cried in anguish. "Tempt me no more with thy beauty and thy love. Save my soul at least from the greatest crime of which it is capable—that of dragging you down to share my doom. Would that I had never crossed your path since I have lived only to destroy your happiness."

"Alas!" she said, "it would seem that this vow of yours has indeed changed your heart, and that you love me no more since you can thus cast me from your life."

"You do not understand, no woman could understand," he exclaimed. "I love you indeed, but that love must be swept away by other forces to which my life is dedicated. Revenge is a passion which cannot share its dominion over us. The heart that holds it cannot hold love too. When I think of that to which I am pledged, I can see nothing but the black path of possible crime which leads me far from you. My father's evil act struck others than the innocent being at whom he aimed it. I think that at the same time he must have slain my soul too, and that some of the deadly poison from the cup my mother drank is coursing also through my veins. When I think of her, then I swear to you, Leonora, that, far from regretting the vow I have taken, I long to strike, and can hardly possess my soul in patience until the hour comes when proof of his guilt shall enable me to do so. Even my love for you seems forgotten and swallowed up in feelings of black hatred and revenge. He has ruined my life as well as slain my mother; he has robbed my soul of its most precious possession, its love for you. Though

he be my own father, I curse him with all my heart ! ”

He stopped, exhausted with the force of his feelings, but even the quick eye of Leonora failed to read how much this outburst was an effort to stifle the throbbing passion of his love for her.

“ Alas, Filippo,” she said sadly, “ I see that you are right, and that with such passions as now possess your soul no room for love exists. Marriage between us while you are a prey to these stormy feelings could not be that close union of the spirit without which the bodily one is degradation. ’Tis true as you say that we must part until these storms have passed away. Go forth then to work out your destiny alone, but remember, if ever you care to seek it again, my love will still be there waiting for you.”

She laid her hand for one moment gently on his bowed head as he sank to a seat and covered his face. But when he raised it again and the cry, “ Leonora,” broke from his parched lips in the despairing tones of a drowning man, he found himself alone.

CHAPTER XIX

A MARRIAGE FEAST

SIX months had passed by, and already the banqueting-hall of the Donati mansion echoed again to the sound of merry-making, and a gay company had assembled to celebrate the marriage of its master with the beautiful Donna Lucia. At the board were assembled many of the same guests who had graced it at the feast so tragically interrupted by the illness of Agnese. But amongst these friends of the house the Cerchi family were conspicuous by their absence.

Filippo was seated at the end of the board opposite to his father with a beautiful girl from the family of Buondelmonti at his side, but the languishing glances by which she sought to attract his attention fell unheeded, the soft whisperings of the rosy lips provoked no response, and at length, with an injured pout, she turned her attention elsewhere.

The months that had passed since the death of Agnese, and his own vow of vengeance, had left marks on the young man which could not fail to be perceptible. In his father's all-too-speedy betrothal and marriage he had seen all that was wanted to complete the evidence against Corso. Vieri dei Cerchi had been proved right, and the motive which had prompted Corso to his evil deed was but too apparent, though Filippo's watchful gaze had

soon perceived that not only political ambition but passion was one of the forces at work in him.

No wonder the young man's soul was filled with a gloom which spread over his countenance, and in fact, the only motive which had induced him to be present at this banquet which inspired him with repugnance, was that he hoped to gain possible evidence as to his father's guilt, and also cherished a scheme of destroying by the same means the ill-timed rejoicing of the bridal couple.

In fact, already his gloomy and saturnine expression filled Lucia at the far end of the table with disquietude.

"I like not the visage of your eldest son, my Corso," she whispered. "His sinister glances seem to cast a gloom on the feast, and mark you how his dark gaze is fixed on us. Perchance he hath the evil eye," and sceptic though she was, she crossed herself hurriedly.

Corso laughed at her fears.

"It hath not brought much evil to me, at any rate," he whispered back. "Yet, in truth, it is Simone and not Filippo who hath ever been the son of my affection. His gay and lively nature is a pleasant contrast to his brother's."

His eye wandered as he spoke to where Simone's handsome face, flushed with wine, was turned in bold admiration to Maria of the Frescobaldi family, who sat opposite him. Though but seventeen at the time, Simone was already not less noted for his amorous intrigues than for his decided talents.

In spite of his light words, however, Corso himself caught the dark, watchful glance of his eldest son with a secret sense of foreboding. Though the subject of Agnese's death had never been opened between them

since the day after it occurred, he felt instinctively that the silence on Filippo's part boded no good, and was conscious that in avoiding all enquiry into its cause he had earned a contempt which his betrothal, following so soon after, must intensify. The young man's avowed sympathies, too, with the cause of the people, and the growing gloom of his character, were both rendering him obnoxious to his father. His silent presence at the family board, the dark, inscrutable gaze so often fixed upon himself, the quiet comings and goings on business of which he knew nothing, were all galling in the extreme to Corso ; but he feared Filippo too much to send him away. That he was his silent enemy he felt sure, and for that very reason he wished to keep him under his own eye.

But now the calm, penetrating gaze from the far end of the long table seemed to be fixed on him with a silent reproach which became as intolerable to him as to Lucia. With a great effort he addressed della Tosa, who was sitting not far from his left hand.

"Well, Rossellino," he said, "have you no news of good import for this my marriage day ? Thou art ever in the thick of affairs. How goes it with the people now that at length they have the government in their own hands ?"

A faint smile passed across della Tosa's dark features.

"It goes well," he replied. "They are tasting their power. The day of the nobles seem over. In truth, Donati, we are a useless power in the State, is it not so ?"

Donati laughed carelessly.

"The more power the people have for the moment, the better for us, I take it, ere long," he replied. "A

rule of the mob hath ever one end, and that is an anarchy in which they are enmeshed in their own toils to their destruction."

He cast a hasty glance at his son as he spoke, but the gloomy brow of Filippo was now bent on the board.

"The people are but as the children of a community," he continued scornfully. "Give them all they ask for and they will be the first to suffer in consequence. But you have no actual tidings then to bring us, della Tosa?"

"To-morrow," he replied, "I may bring you news that will be no unworthy wedding gift. That rascal, della Bella, will have his lesson soon; but methinks such subjects should have no place at a merry-making."

"There are other things that should have no place at a merry-making," said Filippo, suddenly raising his head.

"And these?" asked della Tosa courteously.

"A sudden fatal illness for one," said Filippo. "Yet ere now I have known such befall."

The words dropped with a wave of sinister recollection on the company, and Corso turned his face away with a momentary shudder.

"It is fitting to mourn for thy mother," said Lucia, coldly, "yet methinks mourning is another of those things which should be absent from a wedding feast."

"Nay, I mourn not," said Filippo, coldly. "If I wept once, those tears have long been dried by other passions. In proof that grief for my dead mother no longer dwells in my heart, I would fain drink to the health of my father's bride. Roberto, the cup I ordered."

Roberto, with trembling hands, handed him a cup filled with wine.

"Fill my father's and the lady's cups," he ordered.

Corso and Lucia gave no sign as the old butler proceeded to obey the son of the house, but Corso's gaze was fixed in fascinated horror on the goblet which Filippo now raised in his hand. Even at that distance the chaste design of Nicolò Pisano was unmistakable.

With an effort he controlled himself.

"To the head of my house first let this cup be my pledge;" said Filippo. "In it I would drown all memories of days of old; but first, I would that your own lips should drink from it. Roberto, hand this cup to thy master and mistress."

As the butler obeyed, Filippo's cold, scrutinising gaze was still fixed on Corso. If, indeed, the cup had once held a poisoned draught placed there by his hand, surely his guilty conscience would give some sign of betrayal now. But at that moment when Roberto approached his master, and Corso's hand was outstretched to take the cup, an interruption occurred, and suddenly there rang on the air peal upon peal of bells, echoing with a wild, discordant clang which could not be mistaken for rejoicing.

At their first sound della Tosa sprang to the nearest casement and flung it open. And now, as Corso placed the untasted cup unheeded before him, della Tosa's voice was raised in clear, loud accents above the outside tumult.

"The news I promised thee to-morrow is in time, after all, for thy marriage feast, Donati," he said. "Those bells are the first enactment of the law by which our new officer of state, the Gonfalonier of justice, summons the people of Florence to carry out its Ordinances. But let all Florence behold what the rule of the populace may lead to, and understand what it is to be governed by those whose uneducated and low-born minds have not yet

learnt to govern themselves. Instead of the iron hand of the nobles, let them taste the ungoverned frenzy, the anarchy and misrule of the rabble. In place of the growl of the mastiff let them have the snarls of curs. Giano della Bella's Ordinances of Justice may yet bring about their own undoing, and Florence will cast off his leadership when she sees its results."

"What means it?" said Corso, rising to join his guest at the window.

"It means that the Gonfalonier with all his company assembles at the church of San Pietro Scheraggio and proceed thence to destroy the Palace of the Galligai."

"It is insurrection. It is revolution. Why should the Galligai Palace be destroyed?" cried the guests.

"Nay," said della Tosa, in cold, sarcastic accents, "it is no revolution, it is but della Bella's new rule of *justice*. It is decreed by his Ordinances that any noble or kinsman of a noble doing an injury to a Florentine citizen shall be punished by total destruction of his property. A year ago, Galligai's cousin slew a Florentine merchant in a fair fight. It is but justice that this deed should be visited on the head of his house. True, it happened far away in France. What matter? A Florentine is a Florentine wherever he may be, and it is but fair that Galligai should bear the penalty. His palace must be destroyed and his property confiscated. What say you, gentlemen; shall we forth to see the sport?"

"We will go," said Corso, "though I had fain my marriage feast had not had this rude interruption. It is, however, not a time for private rejoicings to blind us to our country's threatened ruin. Let us forth and see if means cannot be found to stay the tumult."

The marriage feast, which had indeed lasted already from ten in the morning until noon, was thus abruptly ended, but as Corso hurried from the room, he saw with a start of dismay that in his hasty movement on rising from the table the cup had been knocked over, and that the marble floor near his seat was stained once more with a crimson stain.

Filippo also saw it as he hurried from the room.

CHAPTER XX

"JUSTICE!"

LIKE many idealists, Giano della Bella had hardly gauged the practical working of his own laws, and in basing them on theoretical principles he had not calculated on the low nature of the people whose cause he had advocated. He had fallen into the error fatal to a politician of crediting those beneath him with the same lofty purpose, the same disinterested character as himself, and in attempting to free the oppressed citizens from the rule of the arrogant nobles, he had but placed them under the worse rule of the unrestrained passion of a mob.

Dino Compagni, the future historian of these events, who had been elected to fill the new office of Gonfalonier, had striven to keep the people in check and had opposed the threatened demolition of the Galligai Palace. It had been in vain, and in the scowling countenances, the sullen brows, the muttering voices with which his proposals had been received, he rightly read the smouldering rage of those intoxicated with the lust of power, whose baffled passion, if he were to refuse to act in the matter, would be as that of a hungry beast deprived of its prey.

On leaving the meeting, Dino went straight to the house of della Bella, who had not himself been present, and told him all that had happened.

Della Bella listened with a cloud on his brow, and suggested at first that a conciliatory policy was the one to be pursued, but when Compagni pointed out that the people were too much excited, too thirsty for revenge on the hated nobles, for this, he broke out in a passionate protest.

"Would to God," he cried, "that no such thing as passion existed to cloud the fair face of justice and baffle her operations. I sought not revenge for past wrongs by my ordinances, but to prevent future ones and to place the city under a peaceful rule."

"Alas!" said Compagni, "this thirst for revenge exists, nevertheless, and has to be reckoned with. According to the strict letter of your ordinances the Palace of Galligai should be destroyed. If we forbid it now, the people will rise not only against the nobles, but against the more moderate of their own party. I fear me if only to arrest worse evils they must have their way in this."

And as della Bella still hesitated, he went on:

"As I left them, I saw glances of wrath and hatred turned on me. I heard the muttered words, 'coward' and 'traitor.' Believe me, if we draw back now, we shall be looked upon as too feeble to enforce our own laws. It would be said that our vaunted love of liberty was one of words alone and that laws which exist, but are not put into force, might as well never have been promulgated."

Then with characteristic impetuosity della Bella gave in, advocating that what must be done should be done with all speed, and declaring that it were better that many nobles' palaces should be destroyed than that faith in the

eternal principles of justice and freedom should be shaken. He sought, in fact, to read a high purpose into what his own heart told him was a base action, rather than admit his own impotence to stop it.

Thus it came about that the bells of San Pietro Scheraggio rang out, as we saw, on the next day, that of Corso's wedding feast.

From every quarter of the town the people had flocked in obedience to it, and soon it was packed to overflowing, for already assembled within its walls was the Gonfalonier and the thousand armed citizens who formed his body-guard. In a few words he explained to the assembly that they had been called in the sacred cause of justice, and that if indeed they considered him worthy to act as their representative, the ensign and standard kept there in the church were to be placed by them in his hand.

Soon after he issued forth, bearing the banner, with its new ensign of a red cross on a white ground, and followed by his guard. They were divided into companies of six, each representing one of the wards of the city, and each with its own standard surmounted by fifty footmen, on whose hauberk and shield was marked a cross. And most of this little force were armed not with bows and arrows, nor spears, but with crowbars and pickaxes, for they went forth not to fight against an army of men, but to deal death and destruction to harmless stones and mortar.

Through the narrow streets they wound, to the sound of bells and the loud huzzas of the people, an army about to fight a bloodless battle, and in the sacred name of justice to do an unjust deed.

When Filippo left the banqueting-hall with the other guests, he avoided them, and crossing over the Arno by the further bridge of Rubaconte, instead of by the Ponte Vecchio, came to the precincts of the Galligai Palace, which was on the other side of the river, by a different route. By the time he arrived there, the wicked work of demolition was already begun, and the army of citizens were attacking the solid masonry of the house with their crowbars and pickaxes. The streets round about were densely packed, and the hoarse murmur of voices filled the air. The little band of mounted nobles and their retainers, with Corso in their midst, saw that it would be hopeless to interfere, and, as pointed out by the astute della Tosa, they realized that the best thing for their cause would be to let the work proceed. Filippo, being on foot, and also known to many of the people as belonging to the more popular party, managed gradually to edge his way through the crowd until he came near the palace, but at the corner of a narrow street approaching it he was again blocked. There was a surging crowd of men, women and even children shouting and gesticulating in front of him, and he gave up the attempt to penetrate further for the moment. Suddenly, he was aware that a few paces from him a tall, female figure, closely cloaked and hooded, was looking at him with an intentness that suggested some special interest, and as he returned the gaze, a sudden flash of recognition revealed her to him, for though he could see little but the eyes, something in their calm, steadfast expression, as well as in the tall stately figure, was unmistakable. It was Leonora. At first, he determined not to take any notice of her, but her expression so clearly invited him to approach her, so

plainly appealed to him, that he found it impossible to disobey, and with a great effort he elbowed his way to her side.

As he did so, the extra pressure of the crowd caused her hood to fall, and her face was disclosed. Even in that hurried glance, before she drew it over her head again, Filippo could not fail to see the change that the months of their separation had produced in her. She seemed not only older, but the face bore the indefinable stamp on it of suffering brain and heart, but none the less acute. Something had vanished from her. The hopefulness of youth no longer shone in her eyes, but the whole countenance had gained in strength and character.

As Filippo stood by her side he felt once more the ennobling influence which had once been so much in his life, but the love which had then burnt in his heart seemed held in check, not only by the barrier that his life had placed over it, but by the self-control, the calm manner. Leonora, in the intensity of feelings aroused by the spectacle, her personal emotion was, in fact, entirely swept aside. It might almost have been that she and Filippo had never loved.

"We must save them," she whispered, in calm, distinct tones. "Galligai is aged and he has women and children with him. Who knows to what evil extremes the passions of the people may lead. Look!"

She glanced at an upper window, and behind its panes looked into the street. Filippo saw the aged face of Galligai distraught with grief, while at his side was his daughter Margherita with two frightened children clinging to her.

"Come with me," said Leonora firmly. "The people know us both. They will let us through."

As if in a dream, Filippo followed her, while before them, in obedience to her quiet, decided tones or impressive gesture, the crowd gave way.

"It is the daughter of the little Friend of the People. Let her pass," they said, for as yet della Bella had not lost his hold on their hearts.

The main door into the palace had been already battered in when they reached it, and the mob were busy rifling the lower apartments. Filippo and Leonora passed through unnoticed and made their way in the direction of the upper room where the Galligai family had sought shelter.

"This must be the door," said Leonora, pausing before the entrance to an apartment, and knocking. There was no answer, and she knocked again.

This time a woman's voice replied.

"Who is there?" it said in timid tones.

"A friend," replied Leonora. "Let me in."

Very cautiously the bolts were withdrawn and Galligai's daughter stood before them.

"Who are you," she said, "and what would you have?"

"I have come to lead you to safety," said Leonora. "This is not a place for the infirm or young. Bid your father and the children follow me."

Margherita opened the door a little wider, glancing timidly at Filippo as she did so.

"I am Donati's son," said Filippo, and, with an expression of relief, she let him in.

"Father," she said to the old man, "this is one of the Donati and another friend who would take us into safety. Will you come?"

But Galligai only shook his head.

" Go, and take the babes, an you will," he said, " but I leave not this palace. Even now they can surely not destroy it." Then he flung open the casement and leaned out.

" Good people, desist, I pray," he cried. " I have done you no wrong. My kinsman, for the fault committed in a distant land, was fined and imprisoned. Is not that enough ? "

There was a hoarse roar in response.

" Down with the tyrant's palace ! Let it be razed to the ground ! Down with the murderers of Ben-coitini ! "

" Look you, I will give you half of my substance," pleaded the old man " The half, I promise you in good faith, but leave me my home, my friends. Leave me my home."

In reply there was a storm of thundering blows which drowned the old man's voice and shook the building to its foundations.

Margherita began to weep, and Galligai covered his face ; for every blow on the walls he loved seemed to strike at his heart. Leonora touched him gently on the arm.

" There are things more dear than even the walls of our home," she whispered. " Would you see your daughter and grandchildren in those same hands which so ruthlessly destroy this building ? Come, I can lead you by a back way to the neighbouring palace where your friends, the Admiari, will give you shelter."

Something in the magnetic influence of Leonora as much as the words she spoke had the desired effect on the old man.

"For the sake of her and the children, I will go," he said, glancing at his daughter. Then, turning again in wonder to Leonora, he added, "But who are you, and how can you lead us through the mob?"

"My name is of no import," she said. "Come!" She took the old man gently by the hand, and with one despairing glance at the work of destruction below, he rose to follow her.

"But where are my sons and retainers?" he asked. "Surely they should form our escort."

"Your chance of safety depends on having no escort of your own," she replied. "Come."

A louder yell, a sound of masonry falling and crashing below, urged Galligai to obey, and the children added their entreaties to Margherita's. The younger, a girl of six, clung round his knees.

"I don't like the noise and the fierce, ugly men," she cried. "I think this lady is the Madonna or one of the saints. It would be wicked not to go with her. Take me away, dear Nonno. Take me away." While her brother, a fine boy of eight, seized his grandfather's hand, crying:

"Let us go. Let us go, Nonno, that we may live to punish these villains."

The appeal of the children moved the old man more than aught else could do.

"They are a cursed brood," he cried, and, as he rose, tall and erect, some of the fire of youth seemed again to animate him.

"I curse them one and all," he cried. "May the foul fiend seize them and plunge them into hell; and most of all I curse that arch-hypocrite, della Bella."

Filippo's hand sought his sword, but Leonora made him a sign.

At present her whole being was too much absorbed in the attempt to save that beloved father from the worst possible consequences of his mistakes to be deterred from her course by curses.

Leading the little girl in one hand and the old man in the other, she started, while Filippo and Margherita followed with the boy.

" You must show me the way to the entrance nearest the Admiari Palace," she said to Galligai.

After passing through several long passages, the little group of fugitives reached a staircase leading to a small, seldom-used door. The street beyond was less densely packed than the others, as the crowd had swarmed to the front where most of the work of destruction was going on.

Leonora closed the door behind them and beckoned to two men loafing near, who both recognised her.

" You will help me lead my friends to safety," she said to them. " They are not fit to face the crowd."

One of the men peered rudely at Galligai.

" Why, it is the old Galligai himself," he growled.

" It is no matter," she replied ; " the law which, as faithful citizens, you are enforcing, is against property only, remember ; moreover, Giovanni, I, a woman, ask this help of you."

" Come on," he said, gruffly, and beckoning to his comrade. " We will see you to safety."

Protected thus by two members of the people, the little group excited small attention, and in a few minutes the

door of the Admiari Palace opened to receive them. Ere they entered, Galligai turned to Leonora, and bending over her hand, said :

" To you, fair lady, I own my safety and that of those dear to me. May I not know to whom I am indebted ? "

" To Leonora della Bella, the daughter of the Friend of the People," she said, as she turned and left him.

Filippo was still standing there.

She held out her hand, and for one moment her clear gaze rested on him.

" Thank you, Filippo," she said, and glided swiftly away.

The next day, not a stone stood in its place where once had been the Galligai Palace ; but now that the popular excitement had passed and the deed was actually done, there were many beside the nobles who did not hesitate to denounce it as an unnecessary and cruel enforcement of the law. The more revolutionary and turbulent of the populace, led by Pecora, alone gloried in it, and there were many among the better class citizens who grew grave at the thought that power should be in such hands as theirs. Among these was the Gonfalonier himself, whose soul had sickened at the work he had nominally led. And on the soul of Giano della Bella there weighed a heavy, secret sense of misgiving, for he realized that the forces which he had started were beyond his power to control, and that the fruit of the seed he had sown might be quite other than what he had imagined. He felt as one might feel who had striven with every fibre of his being to provide bread for his starving children, and on

whom had fallen the terrible uncertainty whether he had, in truth, administered food or poison.

But there was no turning back possible now, and Florence must work out once more her own salvation or ruin.

CHAPTER XXI

CONSPIRACY

MANY scenes of violence followed on the destruction of the Galligai Palace, and the Gonfalonier who immediately succeeded Dino Campagni took this act as a precedent for enforcing the new laws in their utmost rigour. The passions of the people were inflamed, and having once tasted power they were clamorous in their demands for the so-called justice which inflicted severe penalties on the nobles wherever pretext could be found, and if the Gonfalonier hesitated, he was denounced as a coward and traitor, and threatened with the popular fury. At the same time there were still many who looked upon the wholesale destruction of property in punishment of small offences as an outrage, and a cruel wrong. A crisis was reached by a glaring act which proved how little justice had, in reality, to do with the popular spirit.

One of the noble house of Buondelmonti, while acting as judge, condemned a criminal to death. For pronouncing this well-deserved sentence, the populace swarmed to the Buondelmonti Palace and destroyed it.

The nobles who had hitherto watched the course of events silently, now began to prepare for action. They appealed first to the ruling Priors for protection and support, but they were intimidated by the people, and seemed powerless.

With the nobles, however, there now secretly joined

some of the better class citizens, and a messenger was dispatched to the Pope, Boniface VIII., who had lately succeeded to the pontifical chair, asking for his aid. In response to this appeal, a Roman knight, named Colona, was sent to Florence, armed with certain authority from Pope and Emperor, but in the present state of riotous disorder which reigned in the city, he was practically powerless.

One evening, after dark, a little band of conspirators, including Corso Donati and Rossellino della Tosa, assembled in the church of San Giacopo across the Arno, to discuss what was to be done. Since open means seemed to fail, it was resolved to try secret ones.

Two torches, and the lamp hanging in front of the altar, alone lit up the gloomy recesses of the building, and cast dark, flickering shadows on the forms of the conspirators. At the door stood a little body of retainers, with drawn swords in their hands, ready to prevent any interruption from outside, for who knew, in the present state of things, what dire penalties might not be inflicted for the crime of holding a secret meeting.

The situation was first openly discussed, and one after another of the nobles present came forward with a grievance of his own, or a story of the gross injustice suffered by others.

At the end, Corso Donati sprang to his feet and poured out a flood of invective against the destruction of property and other punishments unjustly inflicted.

"In truth," he wound up, "if a nobleman's horse chance to flick its tail in the face of a citizen, if one push another by accident in a crowd, or even if two children of different rank quarrel at their play, it seems

that accusations are proffered. Are we then to suffer our houses to be demolished, our hearths desecrated, and our property lost for such trifles ? ”

“ Nay,” cried an eager voice, “ let us cast off this slavery without delay. Let us arm at once, and rush to the Piazza and kill all on whom we can lay hands, so that neither ourselves nor our sons shall ever be crushed by this hateful popolani.”

Other voices joined in.

“ To arms ! to arms ! ” they cried. “ Let us strike at every popolano we encounter.”

Then above the tumult rose the voice of Frescobaldi, the sworn enemy of della Bella.

“ My friends,” he said, “ not by this indiscriminate violence can our object be attained. It is useless to lop off the branches if the roots remain in the ground. Let the shepherd perish, and the flock will scatter. Strike at Giano della Bella first.”

There was a profound silence, broken by the calm, quiet tones of Rossellino della Tosa.

“ The wise knight’s counsel is good,” he said, “ but too risky. It were no easy matter to assassinate della Bella in secret and if our plot to destroy him were discovered, we should all perish. Were it not better to conquer our foes by cunning and soft words, and then harry them in such wise that they can never lift their head again ? ”

“ Nay,” cried another voice, “ let us have their blood. Let us kill this pestilent della Bella who hath framed these iniquitous laws.”

“ Aye, down with Giano ! Strike the shepherd and disperse the flock,” cried a chorus of voices in response.

When there was silence, della Tosa's calm, even tones were again heard addressing the assembly.

"My friends," he said, "I entreat you to pause awhile and consider ere you resort to violence. What avail were assassination, when the cause is left untouched? Strike down della Bella, and at once one will be found to take his place and from the blood of this monster will spring a brood to torment us. Surely it were better to use craft than violence, to slay the spirit which animated our enemies than merely lay low the body of their leader?"

"The nob itself can use the spear or the knife. What avail our higher birth and our superior wit, if we cannot discover what will strike a yet more deadly blow?"

"Let us hear first what that something is," interposed Frescobaldi, who still thirsted for the blood of his foe; but it was easy to see that the majority of the others present were deeply impressed by della Tosa's words.

"A free rein should be given to the most violent party in the city," he continued in reply to Frescobaldi's words. "The ruffian Pecora, and his vile crew, should be allowed to taste blood, and it is easy to see that as a result they will soon cast aside the last vestige of restraint. The next step will be to trap della Bella into expressions of disapproval. Some of us will be on the careful watch for these, and when his words are conveyed by us to the extreme members of his own party, they can easily be persuaded that he is a traitor to them. Thus will della Bella's followers soon be split up into two sections, and in the end, as can be easily seen, he will have displeased both, and one or other of them will rise and drive him forth."

"I like not your cold, calm methods," said Frescobaldi

hotly. "They are too uncertain for my taste. Give me the direct argument of good, cold steel wherewith to answer an enemy, not the slow methods of tortuous intrigue. I am for killing della Bella. Who sides with me?"

Some few voices only responded, and the majority of the conspirators were evidently won by the more astute reasoning of della Tosa.

The course of action was finally left undecided, but arrangements were made by della Tosa for those who favoured his schemes to meet him again to consult over them, in the same spot, a week later.

CHAPTER XXII

THE TRAIN IS LAID

WHILE the political events in Florence were thus approaching a crisis, the noble spirit of the man who had brought so much unintentional evil to Florence was torn with agony. Too late della Bella would have stopped the forces he had set to work, but though nominally still the leader of the popular party, he could not fail to feel that his power was actually over, and that a spirit of rebellion against him was at work. For such a nature as his the tortuous paths of Italian politics at this time were really impossible. To his simple, direct line of thought, the dark plots and counterplots, in which more astute brains found their element, were beyond his power of comprehension. He was as one fighting against an enemy whose weapons and modes of warfare he had never seen nor learnt.

And now, as the crisis of his career approached, and the ominous signs of his approaching downfall could not fail to be perceived by himself, he failed to perceive at the same time what dark and hidden forces were working against him behind that of the people, and that the signs of enmity and disfavour which wrung his heart from the populace had, as motive force, the insidious craft of his enemies, the nobles.

The fact was, however, that della Tosa had won his point, and at the next meeting of the nobles it had been agreed that the warfare against the Friend of the People should be carried out by insidious methods, and that to poison his own party against him would be the surest means to bring about his downfall.

It thus happened that at the meetings of the popolani, nobles disguised as members of that order began now to meet, and under this guise they were able to stir up the baser side, which is never far from the surface in a mob, and for their own purpose to incite glaring deeds of injustice against themselves. No sooner would some act against one of the nobles be agreed to, than those who had themselves instigated it would seek out della Bella, and putting the matter before him, ask him if this were, in truth, the justice he advocated.

Again and again did their noble victim fall into the base trap laid for him.

On one night in particular did he harm himself irretrievably in this way. At a meeting in San Pietro Scheraggio, Rossellino della Tosa rose to speak.

"Messer Giano della Bella," he said, "though I am myself a noble, I, like yourself, am a lover of justice. It is for this reason that I am here to speak to-night, since it would seem to me that the justice I have sworn to serve is not the one that reigns in our State at present. I have but lately passed through the Piazza, where a man named Pecora, who is, I am told, well known to you, was addressing a number of the people. 'Let every noble be brought low, whether innocent or guilty,' were his words. 'Sir, I ask, is this justice? Is this the spirit you would uphold?'"

Della Bella rose swiftly to reply, his keen, mobile face alive with indignant denial.

"Nay, indeed, I would have you believe," he cried, "this is not the justice I uphold. It is the guilty alone and not the innocent I would punish."

"Yet this Pecora preaches otherwise," said della Tosa, smoothly. "The people believe what he says, and even the judges are afraid of the people. But last week, one of the popolani stabbed the servant of the noble Balducci so that he died, and the judges brought it in an accident and let the perpetrator go unpunished. Is this justice, Messer della Bella?"

"Nay, nay," again cried della Bella. "This is a foul wrong. Perish the city rather than that such a state of things should continue! Let not such unjust acts be performed in the name of justice."

"A little boy, one of the people," continued della Tosa, quick to follow up his advantage. "fell under the hoofs of a horse ridden by a noble, whether by design or accident, who shall say? At any rate the child was but slightly injured, yet the noble whose horse did the hurt is fined half his estate in consequence. Is this justice?"

Again did della Bella's eager, impulsive spirit lead him into the trap set for his undoing.

"Nay, nay," he cried once more, "such a gross miscarriage of justice cannot for a moment be tolerated. New laws shall be framed, I do assure you, to repress all such wickedness."

"I thank you, sir," said della Tosa, with his oily smile, for he had attained his object. "Such an assurance from one so honourable as yourself was all I required to set my mind at rest."

At this he left the meeting and sped back to the Piazza, where Pecora and his followers were assembled.

"I, too, though a noble, am on your side," he said, when opportunity gave him a hearing. "I have come to warn the friends of Florence against a traitor in their midst. He who has professed to lead your cause is, in truth, your enemy in disguise. But now have I myself heard him say that new laws shall be made to repress you, that the sentences lately passed on the nobles are iniquitous, that it was wrong to let the popolano who stabbed Balducci's servant go unpunished. Beware of della Bella. Trust him not. He is a wolf in sheep's clothing."

And now, the seed having been sown in those untutored and undisciplined minds, he glided from the crowd, well pleased with his evening's work.

"Down with della Bella!" cried a rough voice, as he turned to go.

"Aye! down with della Bella. He is, after all, but a noble himself. What good can be expected from that cursed brood?" said another.

Then Pecora rose to address them, his coarse face red with passion.

"New laws, forsooth!" he cried. "Who ever heard the like! What do we want with new laws? These we have are good enough, at any rate for me. It's our turn now. Who are the cursed nobles that they should be considered? Let della Bella obey the people, not the people obey della Bella. We want freedom, that's what we want. We want no new laws to bind us."

Thus the train for della Bella's undoing was subtly laid. But while matters were rapidly approaching a crisis, a

most unexpected turn of events took place, and the whole of Florence was startled by the sudden news of Corso Donati's arrest.

CHAPTER XXIII

ARREST

WHEN Filippo had turned away from Leonora on the day of the demolition of Galligai's Palace, the gentler side of his nature, which had once more been profoundly stirred by his contact with her, was soon lost sight of in a reminder of the political intrigues, and of the dark course of action against his father on which he had felt it his destiny to embark. As he was about to cross the Arno, he felt a heavy hand laid on his shoulder, and turned to encounter the fierce, uncouth figure of his uncle, dei Cerchi.

"A word with you," he said, as the young man paused. "If you are not in a desperate hurry, perhaps you will step into my house with me."

"I am in no hurry," said Filippo, preparing to accompany him.

"This is a bad day's business," said Vieri, as soon as they were seated.

"'Tis so, indeed," said Filippo; "almost it makes me inclined to forsake the popular cause to see such a sad perversion of justice."

"Tush!" said Vieri, impatiently. "I spoke not in that sense. What matters the destruction of a palace or two if our cause triumph? But mark my words, nephew, this is a bad day's work for the people's cause,

and they could have done nothing better to further the interests of the nobles. They have gone too far, and all will see it, and now will be the chance for thy father to play the trick of popularity, and with smooth speeches to win a place in the arena. Not just yet, perhaps, but it will come. The mob are proving themselves unfit to rule, and in the reaction it will not be to the *popolani grassi*, but to the nobles, that the fickle citizens will turn, if a leader is found ready. Corso is such a one. He is ready to seize the first opportunity. But this must not be. By some means or other the murderer and convent ravisher shall be prevented from ruling. He must be crushed."

"I see not how it is to be done," said Filippo.

Vieri laughed.

"It is as simple as daylight all the same," he said.

"Now, while the populace is in full power, Corso must be clapped in prison by one of the bye-laws and kept there until his chance is over."

"But on what pretext?" asked Filippo. "Even the mob can hardly clap him in prison where no offence has been committed."

Vieri laid a heavy hand on Filippo's shoulder. "That is where my scheme comes in," he said, "he shall commit an offence punishable with imprisonment and perchance death, and it is thou who wilt be the means of his doing it."

Filippo's heart beat rapidly. "What am I to do?" he whispered, hoarsely.

"You remember Simone Galastrone, on whose nasal appendage you left a reminder of thy dagger, which he will carry with him to the grave?" replied his uncle.

"Why, yes," said Filippo, recalling the scene between himself and young Galastrone on the day of della Bella's great speech in the Piazza. "He paid me a coarse insult, which I wiped out on the spot, and I have thought no more of it since."

"Not so with the Galastrone family," continued Vieri; "the injury done to the son of the house has increased old Galastrone's former hatred against the Donati family tenfold, and he still harbours thoughts of revenge."

"Would he slay me or my father?"

"Either, in fair fight, perchance, if occasion occurred; but Donati handles his sword too well for that to be likely. If they meet, however, a quarrel is certain to ensue, and it were a most unlikely chance that Corso should escape the hot resentment of the popular party, and punishment from the government in consequence. It is for this your help is needed."

"In what way?"

"About three weeks hence," said Vieri, "the Galastrone family are all to be present at the marriage feast of a son of their house with a daughter of the Martini. I will find out the exact time and hour that they will be riding home, and it is for you to arrange that Corso, accompanied by yourself and a body of retainers, should go in the same direction at the same time. Should he and Galastrone be inclined to pass each other peacefully, it is for you to see that a quarrel take place, and as soon as the fight begins, to raise a hue and cry which will attract the notice of any passers-by, since eye-witnesses will be needed later."

"Perhaps it is I myself who will be the one arrested," suggested Filippo.

"Not likely, if you act carefully and keep out of the quarrel as much as need be; besides which, have you forgotten that our new, wise laws visit the sins of a house on its head, as we saw in the case of Galligai? All that you have to make sure of is that your father ride forth at the time named."

"Perchance to his death," said Filippo, and in spite of all his wrath against his father the thought of his vow hung heavily on his soul.

On the day in question, Filippo persuaded Corso to start in the direction where he would meet the Galastrone party, by means of a forged letter, purporting to be from della Tosa, requiring his presence at the church of San Giacomo, where the meetings of the nobles had been held, and as the note warned him not to go unattended, he took with him a small body of retainers and Filippo himself, as he had hoped.

On the way it fell out, as arranged, that Corso and the Galastrone party, with Galastrone himself at its head, met face to face in a narrow street. Beyond that, however, Filippo's efforts to provoke a quarrel were unneeded. Corso himself would have passed on his way without risking one had the other side been like-minded, but Galastrone chose not to let this opportunity to insult his enemy pass him by, and instead of drawing aside to let Corso pass, he rode on in the middle of the way as though he did not see him.

This was at once too much for Corso's proud spirit to brook.

"How now, Messer Galastrone," he cried, "make way for thy betters."

"That will I gladly do when I see them," was the angry retort.

"I should advise you to use your eyes with all speed then," shouted Corso.

Galastrone gave a mock bow.

"I should not presume to reckon myself the equal of the Baron Malefami," he said, "were it not for the fact that his son condescends to mix with the populace and to openly show himself a supporter of della Bella."

"Thou liest in thy vile throat," cried Corso.

"Then Donna Agnese cannot have been over-virtuous," was the reply. "But son or no son of thine, thou shalt answer with the sword for the wound he gave my son a year ago. Pass me if you can."

At this the knives and swords on either side were rapidly drawn, and a pretty skirmish ensued, to which, attracted by Filippo's hue and cry, spectators from all parts of the town soon flocked, and a huge crowd of excited and curious citizens hemmed the assailants in behind and before. Blows were freely exchanged, and had it not been for the difficulty of fighting in so narrow a space, much blood might have been shed. As it was, several wounds on either side were inflicted, and when at last one of Corso's followers was felled to the ground, a blow was aimed in return which proved fatal to a Galastrone retainer. The sight of the corpse caused a moment's consternation, and seizing his opportunity, Corso pushed his way past his enemy with the taunting words:

"Perhaps you will have learnt to know your betters next time that you see them, Messer Galastrone."

But Corso found it less easy to push his way through the crowd than he had anticipated.

A swarm of excited citizens confronted him on every side, and soon the cry arose:

"To the Bargello! To the Bargello! Let not the noble escape the punishment of his crime."

And powerless against so many hands, Corso found himself dragged from his horse and forced to the Bargello, where he was led before the Podestà by an excited crowd clamouring for his trial.

As there seemed no doubt that a citizen had actually been slain in the brawl by one of Corso's followers, if not by his own hand, the Podestà had no course but to accede to the cry of the populace, and Donati, in spite of his kinship with him through his recent marriage, was cast into prison to await his trial.

The sentence seemed a foregone conclusion, since several eye-witnesses were ready to swear that they had seen what had occurred, and for the offence of slaying a citizen it was not likely that the present government would allow a noble to escape without at least the confiscation of all his property. The event caused widespread rejoicing. Giano della Bella and his adherents began to indulge in hopes that with the downfall of this haughty noble the mob would be appeased and that Florence would settle down to the longed-for peace. The people themselves were wild with joy at the thought of a heavy sentence, and the loss of power, for the man whom they rightly considered their worst enemy, while the popolani grassi rejoiced at the downfall, not only from personal enmity, as in the case of Vieri dei Cerchi, but because in the blow to Donati's ambition they saw the best chance for their own success.

But none guessed the course that the so-called justice of the day was, after all, to take.

In the Donati Palace, Filippo dwelt in gloomy silence,

brooding over the possible fate which he had been instrumental in bringing upon his father, and deadening every tender impulse of his soul by the memory of his mother's death and of his vow to avenge it. Simone openly lamented, bewailing the cruel fate which had cast so brave a soul into prison, and suggesting various schemes for his father's release.

But Filippo's gloom and Simone's grief found no response in Lucia, and behind a calm, inscrutable demeanour, her scheming brain was at work.

Her foot was but on the lower rung of the ladder of power which she had resolved to climb. True, it had been reached by paths over which it was as well not to cast backward glances. But so far had she come, and it rested with her, so she told herself, to devise means of saving Corso and of reinstating him with herself on the pathway she had marked out.

CHAPTER XXIV

IN PRISON

THE day of Corso's trial before the Podestà drew near. Witnesses had already been examined and their depositions taken down. The whole evidence had but to be placed before a committee of judges with the Podestà at their head, and sentence would be pronounced.

The excitement in Florence was intense, and already crowbars and pickaxes were being sharpened ready for their work of destruction on the Donati Palace.

On the night before judgment was to be given, Corso was pacing up and down his cell in the Bargello, his soul consumed with futile wrath. Was this, then, to be the end of his leadership in Florence? For this miserable petty quarrel was his whole career to be blighted? The ambition which was such a ruling element in his character seemed to gnaw at his brain in impotent fury. Once free, he might even yet work, and intrigue, and plot. Yet, as he knew full well, without wealth, were his to be confiscated, he would have little chance of worldly success or of retrieving the position he should lose. Thoughts of the wife whose love he had enjoyed for so short a time came to him, sending waves of passionate longing for her beauty through him. What effect would his downfall have on the devotion she had sworn to him, he wondered; and with a pang he recalled how, in all her protestations

of affection, ambition for a future she should share had been ever present.

At this point of his meditations, the door of the cell was opened, and the voice of a jailor outside said :

"One hour, my lady, is permitted ; no more," and then it softly closed behind a tall, female figure. In the dim light, Corso failed for the moment to recognise his wife ; but the next, soft arms were round his neck, and her familiar voice whispered his name.

"Corso ! Corso ! at last. How I have wept and hungered for this minute. Oh ! cruel fate to tear thee from me. We must never part again, beloved."

"We never should have done, could I have prevented," said Corso, crushing her against him. "Once out of this hellish place, I will take good care not to get inside again. And so, my Lucia can love me even when I am fallen ?"

"To me you can never fall," she whispered, clasping her hands round his neck and gazing at him with lustrous eyes. "You are my lord and master, and my heart's king, however low your enemies might seem to bring thee. But listen, Corso—I bring you good news—to-morrow you will be free."

"Impossible, my dear one," he said, though her words and the tone of conviction with which she uttered them caused his heart to bound. "Impossible ! Your wishes are outrunning your discretion. Alas ! the evidence against me is undisputable, and it but remains to see the amount of harm these hounds of hell can bring me by the sentence. Do you think you could still love a Corso who, instead of a proud leader, may be a homeless wanderer compelled to seek his fortune as a mendicant on foreign bounty ?"

"Shall I not always love you," she replied, gently stroking his cheek. "Oh! Corso, how can you ask?"

"My queen," he murmured, caressing her hair and gazing with passion on the dark eyes and the lips which shone as a line of scarlet against her white face in the gloom. And yet he felt himself wishing that he could have tested her love, holding her thus in his arms while they both still thought him a doomed man, if, indeed, there were any glimmer of truth in her words as to his release.

"It is true," she said, raising her head, with its dark masses of hair, from his shoulder. "Corso, you will not be sentenced. I have seen to that."

"You!" he cried. "You marvel among women! What have you to do with courts and sentences?"

She gave a glad little laugh.

"Do you truly think me wonderful?" she said. "To me it seems that I am only wonderful in this, that I have your love, Corso. It was no such difficult matter to obtain your release."

"But the evidence was against me," he gasped. "What woman's wit have you employed to alter it?"

"Woman's wit and a woman's tears can sometimes win where even a man's brain would fail," she said. "Do you forget that I am a kinswoman of the Podestà?"

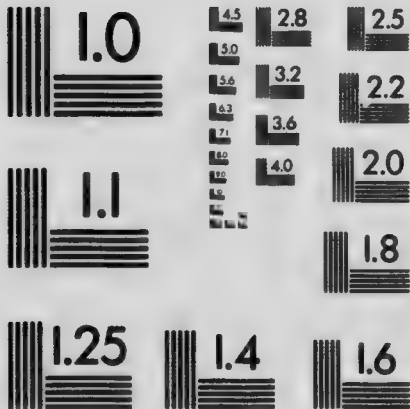
"What have you persuaded him to do?" he exclaimed, gazing at her in admiration, not unmixed with amazement.

"Not much," she laughed. "It was merely to transpose the names in the depositions, so that instead of it reading that it was you who slew Galastrone's servant, it reads that it was Galastrone who slew one of yours. It



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was really quite simple. Just a few strokes of the pen on the documents that will be brought before the judges to-morrow."

"And the Podestà agrees to this!" cried Corso.

"I persuaded him," she replied, with downcast eyes.

"By thy beauty?" he asked darkly.

"Nay, nay, you great, foolish, jealous Corso," she said, stroking his hand. "If I did make myself a little agreeable, surely for your sake it were pardonable. But, in truth, my wit as a woman, aided by his own fears, was quite sufficient to accomplish my purpose. He is, as you may have noticed, a man of small courage, and I know that this two years' office in turbulent Florence is little to his liking. I pointed out to him the immense personal risks he ran in sentencing you, and warned him that the nobles would not bear much more, and if they should rise, it would be on him, as the condemner of their popular leader, that they would first turn. 'And what about the populace, if I thus pervert justice?' asked the coward. I scoffed at his fears of the mob and then asked him how, on leaving Florence at the end of his term of office, which now draws nigh, he would like to face my father, Uguccione, as an enemy, which he undoubtedly would be, were you to be sentenced."

"Thou art indeed the wisest, as well as the most beautiful, of thy sex," cried Corso, once more pressing her to him. "But!" he added, with sudden fear, "what of the other judges? They will not be moved by thy beauty, nor frightened by thy father's enmity as Lucino da Como is. Will they accept the garbled evidence you describe?"

"There is another lever, besides beauty and wit, in

managing the affairs of the world. Can you not guess it, Corso ? ”

“ Do you mean gold ? ” he said.

“ Yea, Corso, a hundred golden florins from your estate is surely not too large a price for your release. Ah, Corso, to-morrow you will leave this vile cell in which you mope like a caged eagle, and return to light and to power and to love.”

Her lips were raised enticingly, and as Corso pressed his on them, he whispered : “ What would I not do for thee, Lucia ? ”

“ There is nothing by which I can prove your words,” she answered. “ In having thee, have I not al—and yet,” she added, as though suddenly struck with the thought, “ there is one small boon I would crave.”

“ Name it, Lucia ; that alone is needed.”

“ It is but this,” she said, edging a little from him and speaking with a nervous hesitation most unusual to her ; “ the presence of thy son Filippo makes me miserable. Very reasonably, no doubt, but unmistakably, the youth looks on the presence of a step-mother with disfavour. Why should his dark, unfriendly glances mar the happy harmony of our married life ? I would have him sent away.”

“ Whither wouldst thou send him ? ” asked Corso, in a restrained voice, from which he strove to hide a dark and terrible suspicion which suddenly sprang in his heart.

“ I thought, perhaps, a journey to Rome might be arranged,” she said nervously, and then, as Corso did not immediately reply, she suddenly broke out in passionate speech.

“ Corso, Corso,” she cried, “ don’t you know, don’t you

feel that Filippo is our dangerous enemy? What plots are being hatched behind that dark and gloomy brow, I know not, but this I know, that there is danger to you, danger to both of us in his presence. He will be a sinister influence dogging our footsteps to power, waylaying and counterplotting against all our schemes. Send him away, Corso, I implore you. I cannot bear his presence. Was it not he who sent for your use the very cup from which Agnese quaffed her last draught? Was it not he at whose persuasion you obeyed a note from della Tosa which he tells me he never wrote, and which sent you forth on the expedition which hath brought you here?"

"'Tis true," muttered Corso. "The lad hath totally changed. He loves me no more, and not only does he sympathise with the popular party, but, if I am not deceived, is hand in glove with them. But for this very reason I would keep him with me and have him under my own eyes, so that if he begins to work mischief, I can discover it better than if he be out of my house. Moreover, what use to send him on a long journey? He would return."

The words were spoken by Corso with no intention of tearing away the veil from whatever dark design the evil mind of Lucia was harbouring, but as they fell from him, he realised with a start how they might be taken, and in the oppressive silence which ensued the thought in his mind seemed to take tangible shape and to stand as a dark, unholy presence between them.

"It does not always happen that those who go on long journeys do return," she whispered at last.

"Lucia, art thou, after all, but a fiend in the form of a most beautiful woman," cried Corso, "that thou

shouldst always place the suggestion of evil deeds before me ! ”

Then she fell to weeping.

“ Cruel, cruel,” she sobbed, “ when I have no thought for aught but thy welfare. Ah ! woe is me, if even you reproach me.”

“ Nay, hush, hush ! ” he said, half melted by her distress. “ You did not mean what your words implied.”

“ I meant nothing but the thought that perhaps Filippo, if once sent forth, might find other channels for his abilities, and trouble our path no more,” she said, leaning her head against Corso’s breast. “ You will let him go, will you not ? ”

“ If suitable errand for him be found,” said Corso gloomily, but his hand was again caressing her hair.

“ I have seen to that,” she said eagerly. “ The Podestà wished to send a secret message to the Pope as to the unruly condition of the people. He thinks a papal legate abiding here with the power of an interdict might bring them to order. I have bespoken the service for Filippo, who can hardly refuse to obey. There can be no harm in his going, can there, Corso ? Who knows what attractions Rome may have for him ? Oh ! Corso, I want you to myself, with our home unclouded by Filippo. I hate him, Corso. I cannot bear his presence near me.”

“ Hush ! ” said Corso. “ Though he hath never had the affection from me that Simone has, Filippo is, after all, my son.”

“ But a son may be a man’s worst enemy,” she said. Then, raising herself till her lips were on a level with his ear, she whispered :

“ *Corso, I am convinced he knows.* ”

Corso put her from him with a sudden shudder.

"You will let him go, will you not? You will not blame me if, after all, he does not return?" she asked.

For a moment Corso made no reply, and she rose and drew near to him again and clung to him with tender, entreating gestures, taking care the while that the faint light from outside fell on her face.

"Corso, how I love you, how I love you," she whispered, and her baleful beauty once more intoxicated his senses.

"Do what thou wilt, Lucia," he cried, clasping her closely to him. "Your beauty is enough to make one mad."

CHAPTER XXV

REVOLUTION

INTENSE excitement prevailed in Florence the next day, when it was expected that sentence would be pronounced on Corso, for after the evidence at the trial there seemed little doubt that the judges would condemn him.

At the hour of noon the streets were swarming with citizens filled with eager anticipation at the prospect of their haughty noble's punishment. The town wore almost the aspect of a fête day, and in Corso's downfall and possible execution the popolani saw one of the greatest triumphs to their cause. The immediate vicinity of the Bargello was packed with dense masses of people, and every available window and roof showed eager groups of men and women.

"Ill-fame's day is over at last," said one rough fellow, who had secured a place near enough to the building to catch the first tidings thence. "He will soon carry the report of his doings to Purgatory now, if, indeed, the weight of them do not drag him down to hell itself."

"Tush!" said another. "He hath taken care of that. They say he has made up to his Holiness himself lately, and he will see to it that he scrapes through."

"I have never heard tell that Purgatory has a place for violators of convents, and wife murderers," replied the other. "The Devil," and he crossed himself, "will

take care to outdo even the Pope, I should say, in order to secure the soul of Baron Malefami."

"Oh! hush, I beseech thee," said a woman near. "If such words were overheard, they would soon have the tongue out which uttered them."

Nonsense, the days of tongue-cutting and ear-splitting are gone by since the people came into power," said another. "Every tongue in Florence may wag as it chooses now."

But the sound of approaching footsteps was dimly heard, and the voices of the crowd gave place to that low murmur, that thrill of expectation, which heralds the approach of some object of interest on which all minds are concentrated.

And soon there appeared above the heads of the people the white ensign and red cross of the Gonfalonier's standard, followed by the lamb bearing a flag of the wool merchants' guild, and the eagle on a white ball of the drapers'. By that seemingly miraculous process in a crowd which clears a passage through hitherto seemed a dense and impenetrable mass the officer of justice and some hundreds of his army now forced a way to the Bargello and took up their position there, announcing to the people by their presence that they were ready to see the sentence of the Podestà carried out, whether it were execution or only demolition of property.

The sight worked up the spirits of the assembled crowd to an even greater pitch of excitement, and if there had been any doubt as to the sentence before, the businesslike appearance of this small force of irregular soldiers, led by the Gonfalonier in person, rapidly dispelled it. The day was likely to be one of merry sport, for who would

not relish the sight of the great Donati Palace yielding to pickaxe and crowbar? while that of Corso's haughty head laid under the executioner's axe would be a still more delightful spectacle.

And now all tongues were again hushed as in front of the Bargello appeared Lucino da Como, in his official robes of crimson velvet, surrounded by a little group of councillors, wearing the *lucco* or hooded cloak of crimson, which was only permitted to those citizens who had a right to attend committees of the Republic.

And now, behold! the notary, Messer Tommaso Salvali, came forward, nervous and tremulous, to pronounce the Podestà's sentence.

"Messer the Podestà, having duly examined the evidence against Messer Corso Donati, doth not find it sufficiently strong for him to pronounce sentence on him. Messer Corso Donati is therefore acquitted, and may leave the Palace a free man."

Spoken in low, and somewhat tremulous accents, by the frightened notary, these astounding words were, nevertheless, heard by those standing near to him and passed rapidly from mouth to mouth in the crowd. Some refused to believe them and clamoured loudly for Messer Corso to be brought forth and for justice to be administered without loss of time, but when the Podestà and his followers retired slowly inside the Palace, and nothing further happened, even these incredulous spirits became gradually convinced that they were to be disappointed of their expected treat. Tongues began to wag freely again, and on every side scowling brows and threatening glances were directed to the Palace.

"Is this justice? Is the Ill-famed one to commit

murder in our public streets and go unpunished ? What evidence can the Podestà want more than that of eye-witnesses ? " were among some of the comments which might have been overheard.

The Gonfalonier and his little army, meanwhile, began quietly to disperse, and this further proved to the crowd that they were, in truth, defrauded of the anticipated spectacle, and still more excited them.

Suddenly from the far corner of the square appeared the huge form of Pecora, with a crowbar in his hand, and as he brandished it over his head, he was heard to say, in stentorian tones :

" Death to this unjust dog of a Podestà ! Let him and his perish ! "

The cry was caught up eagerly on every side.

A way was readily made for him, several members of the Gonfalonier's army hurried to his side, and soon the square echoed to the sound of heavy hammering and of hard blows from every available weapon against the great door which guarded the Bargello.

The solid mass of wood and iron showed, however, no signs of yielding even to this onslaught ; again and again did Pecora swing his weapon aloft and bring it crashing with all the force of his great arm ; again and again did as many of the Gonfalonier's force as could get near shower blows on it. Dents and signs of the blows appeared, indeed, on the outer surface of the woodwork, but it was on the outer surface only. The main structure of the door was uninjured and remained firm as a rock, the massive iron bolts which secured it giving no sign of yielding.

And now, maddened by baffled rage, the wild spirit

of revolution swept over the mob, and no deed of violence seemed too great for them to commit. A surging mass pressed round the walls of the stately edifice, whose history was so closely interwoven with that of the Commonwealth, and hoarse voices echoed the cry started by the butcher :

" Down with the Podestà ! Let him and his perish ! "

Yet in stately dignity the noble building stood, unmoved by the storm of passion and menace which beat against it. No sign of life appeared from within, no response was made by the Podestà himself or any of his people to the howls of baffled rage and hate which resounded in the air.

But suddenly a new turn came in the course of events, and a new impulse was given to the crowd, whose unsatisfied thirst for revenge now found fresh hope of fulfilment.

Struggling and fighting his way through the crowd appeared one bearing a bundle of faggots, and at the sight of him a hoarse roar of triumph arose, and a way was speedily made for him to pass.

" To the door ! to the door ! " they cried. " Let an entrance be forced by fire. Let the Podestà and all his belongings perish in the flames. Make way for the faggots ! "

Others rapidly followed, bearing like burdens to stack against the great entrance, and soon a force, which even it was powerless to resist, began the work of destruction.

As the first flames commenced to hiss and crackle, the attention of the crowd was suddenly diverted to a movement in the far corner of the square, and the next minute Giano della Bella had forced his way into their midst.

He was on horseback, and his whole appearance denoted the eagerness and haste with which he had come. He had, in fact, been quietly seated in his own house, when Dino Compagni burst in upon him with the news that the people, wild with disappointed rage at Corso's unexpected acquittal, and led by Pecora, were forcing their way into the Podestà's Palace. Conscious of the serious import of these tidings, and realizing to the full the nature of the forces now let loose, della Bella had immediately called for his horse, and galloped to the scene of the uproar, in the desperate hope of calming it with his presence, and of restoring the peace and order which it was his most cherished hope to establish.

A gleam of relief and pleasure passed across his pale, eager face as the crowd turned to him. He was with them once more, with his beloved people, whom he would have died to serve, and his heart thrilled as it ever did at the sight of them. They were, after all, but as wild, wayward children, he told himself, waiting but the voice of their leader ; and a glow of joy burnt in his heart at the thought that he was in time to save them from the effects of their own blind, mistaken passions.

"Stop ! stop !" he cried. "This is not the way to perform justice. This is an error which many of you would afterwards rue to your dying day. Away to your homes like faithful, honest citizens. Not by incendiarism and acts of violence such as this shall ye prove ye are fit to rule."

Alas ! the scheming of della Tosa and the other nobles, and his own rash impetuosity of speech, had already done their evil work. That crowd which would once have greeted him with loud huzzas gave no sign of welcome

now. Some amongst them were indeed faithful still to him who had done so much for their welfare, but they were in a minority, and amongst even these were many who, in their desire for Corso's punishment, were only too quick to see an enemy in any one who was not swept away by the same current of hatred and revenge.

A low murmur of disapproval alone greeted Giano's speech.

"My friends, my friends," he cried, in a desperate appeal, "is it likely that I come hither to seek aught but your welfare? Have I not loved you and served you as none ever served you before? Is it not through me that you have the liberties you now enjoy? Listen to me, I beseech you. I have ever sought for justice, but justice by peaceful means. Let us not sully the robes of the goddess we would serve by bloodshed and violence, by those deeds we have so strongly condemned in the nobles."

He was interrupted by a hoarse confusion of voices, in which were clearly distinguishable the words:

"'Tis true that this fellow sides with the nobles in reality. A traitor. No Friend of the People. A wolf in sheep's clothing. A pest on this lying della Bella. Would he cheat us of our lawful prey?"

Nor were words the only signs of the antagonism against della Bella. Ominous glances, angry gestures, were now directed towards him. He remained calm and apparently unmoved in their midst, facing the angry mob as unflinchingly as he had done in the days when he was its idol, but his countenance was no index to his soul, over which was passing a passion of bitter despair. He gazed with an intense yearning at the angry faces, seeking

to read in them some sign of the old response. It was as if he gazed at a midnight sky to seek the risen sun.

What barrier was it that had risen between their souls and his, that he could no longer penetrate beyond it, and command their allegiance as of old !

It had been very dear to him in days gone by, that popularity, which was deeper than popularity alone, that power which drew other hearts to him and gave him a sense of personal relationship with every individual in the large crowds he addressed. But now other influences still stronger were fighting against him, and before them his old weapons of eloquence and appeal were powerless. Yet far deeper in della Bella's soul than any sense of personal defeat and bitterness was the anguish of the thought that his cause had failed. He had won for this people, whose wrongs had endeared them to him, the rights that they craved, he had sought by this means to restore justice and peace to his beloved State, and he stood now alone to contemplate the wreck of all his endeavours. In place of a haughty nobility inflicting harsh and unjust measures on a downtrodden people, he had raised an unruly mob, ready at the least provocation, to resort to acts of outrage and violence. Where was the justice he had sought in the one more than in the other ?

But while these thoughts and emotions chased each other rapidly through della Bella's mind, a little knot of his still faithful followers had watched the menacing aspect of the crowd with growing uneasiness, and had gradually formed themselves into a body-guard round him. One of them nearest to him now seized his horse's bridle and forced him back.

"I beseech you, sir," he whispered, "flee while there is time. Your presence here but inflames the people the more. Return to your house, I entreat, and to-morrow, when their passions are calmer, perchance they will heed your words."

"To-morrow, when outrage and possibly murder hath been committed," said della Bella.

"Oh! sir, stop not to argue," said another voice. "I swear to you that you are powerless here."

Even as they spoke they forced della Bella's horse further away.

"I will seek the Priors then," he said reluctantly.

"Perhaps amongst us we may devise some plan of action to stop this tumult."

CHAPTER XXVI

FIRST ESCAPE OF CORSO

LUCIA had sought the Bargello early on the morning of Corso's acquittal, and as soon as he was released from his cell he was conducted by her order to a room in the part of the palace reserved for the Podestà's private use, where she awaited him alone.

"Ah! Corso," she cried, throwing herself into his arms, "did I not tell you truly that this day would see you free?"

"Lucia, Lucia, how can I ever repay thy devotion and skill," he murmured, holding her from him so that he could feast his eyes on her beauty. "But for thee, what might not have happened to me to-day?"

"Let us not think of that," she said, with a pretty shudder of horror. "Let us think of the future, Corso. It is for no obscure destiny that Florence's bravest and most noble son is spared this day. You shall live to be its king in all but name."

"To make thee a queen would be an aim worth anything," he answered, and his eye sparkled and his heart beat faster, at the prospect her words called up. Yes, he would rise yet! The day of the people should end, and he would reign in triumph over them. All Florence should bow at his word, and even foreign powers treat its ruler with respect. What the della Scala and the Visconti had done, the Donati could surely accomplish.

Swift on this dream of future power the thought of the succession now flashed on Corso's mind. Sons might be born to him by the beautiful partner in his ambition, and it would be but right they should inherit the State she had helped him to win. Filippo could be disinherited, even supposing that he ever returned from that distant journey to which his consent had been wrung from him, and Simone must be satisfied with some other territory, and might, doubtless, win a duchy of his own ; so well suited did he seem to fight and win and rule by his distinguished graces of mind and person. It would be no unusual course to pass him over in favour of a younger brother in these days when even illegitimacy made no barrier to inheritance, and bastards not infrequently were chosen to succeed their fathers.

He awoke from his contemplation at the soft touch of a hand on his brow.

"Thou art dreaming of that glorious future for us both," said Lucia's soft voice. "It shall be ours, I feel sure, for we will let no obstacle stand in our way to its accomplishment. But now, my Corso, let us turn our minds to the present. I fear me from the sound of the mob outside they are not receiving the news of thy acquittal with the joy that they should, and our return to the Donati Palace had perhaps better be delayed until they have had time to calm down somewhat from their disappointment. What say you?"

As she spoke, she advanced to the casement and drew back a curtain, and at the same moment the crowd caught sight of her and of Corso, who had followed her.

A hoarse yell of rage rose from below, and as it subsided a voice was heard to shout—

"Down with Corso Donati! Down with the Baron Malefami!"

"Aye," cried another, with a glance full of menace at the casement. "Justice shall be done whether the Podestà do it or not. Florence is in the hands of the people now and they will execute vengeance. Have we not our own Gonfalonier, and our own army? Let the murderer perish! Down with Corso!"

The cry was taken up by many more mouths, and an ugly rush was made against the door leading to that quarter of the Palace.

"Come within," cried Lucia, anxiously. "It is not wise to show thyself to this mad mob."

Even as she spoke, a woman pointed to her with a threatening gesture.

"Aye, there they are together," she cried, "there they both be—the Baron and his leman. Let them be slain together."

Lucia hastily withdrew, but on her usually calm countenance Corso read signs of annoyance.

"Never mind their coarse insults," he murmured.

"Everyone knows that you are my lawful wife."

"We have to think of our safety," she replied, pulling herself together. "I like not the look of the crowd. If they force the Palace, the first step will be to put their threat against thy life into execution."

"If they force the Palace," he said. "But they will not do so. I need but wait here a little longer and they will grow tired and disperse quietly to their homes."

In reply, she held up a silencing hand.

"Hark! they are trying to force the main doorway," she cried, as the sound of distant blows fell on their ears.

"Come," she continued, seizing his arm, "it will never do to tarry here, for having seen thee at this casement it is here that they will first seek for thee, and in their present mood they will be satisfied with nothing less than blood."

"Let them come," cried Corso, among whose faults cowardice had no place. "Let them dare to raise hand against Corso Donati!"

"Nay, nay," she implored in desperation, "tarry not here. How couldst thou, alone and unarmed, protect thyself against a mob of furious citizens? Besides, think of me! Wouldst thou give me the agony of seeing thee slain before my eyes, perhaps even of sharing the same fate?"

"Whither shall we go then?" asked Corso, struck by the force of her words.

"This way," she replied, after a moment's thought, and opening the door, she led him down to a passage communicating with the other side of the Palace. The noise from without grew louder and more distinct as they hurried on, but Corso knew the strength of the great door, and still hoped that it would resist. As yet, he knew nothing of those desperate means before which it would be powerless.

As they turned a corner of the passage they came face to face with the Podestà and his wife hurrying distractedly through the Palace.

Donna Giovanna's beautiful face was wild with terror.

"They will slay me," she moaned. "They are vowing death to us all. They force an entrance and any moment may be upon us. Ah! woe is me that we ever set foot in this hateful Florence."

Lucino was trying, but trying in vain, to soothe his distracted spouse.

"There is nothing to fear," he said, but without the tone of conviction which could alone give weight to the assurance. "The mob will spend their fury outside and will never force the great door."

A louder sound of blows than before, followed by a shout of triumph from the crowd, was the answer to his words.

"Hear them! hear them! Ah! where shall we go for safety?" wailed Giovanna.

"This way," said Lucia, prompt as ever in action, and leading her cousin to a suite of rooms on the right. "If we seek the furthest chamber we are at least protected by several more doors, and there is the other staircase which they will not know of, leading both above and below, to which we can have access."

Her practical suggestion seemed somewhat to calm poor Donna Giovanna, and with the two men she followed Lucia.

Passing through three rooms, the doors of which they carefully bolted behind him, the little party came to the one referred to, which was hidden thus away from the main passages, and which led by an inner door on to the small staircase.

Here they paused to await events. The narrow casement opened on to the same side of the Castle as the great doorway, and though they were afraid to allow themselves to appear at it they could, by standing on chairs at some distance away, see something without themselves being seen. Sounds from outside could also be heard, and gave some clue to what was passing there,

though in this way a false impression was for a time conveyed. The attack on the door ceased when the faggots were lighted, and this, combined with the comparative silence caused by della Bella's appearance, gave the impression that the worst was over, and that the crowd would soon disperse. But this hope was soon put to flight by the sight of the fresh supplies of faggots being brought through the crowd, and the real nature of the danger which threatened became apparent to the minds of the watchers. Poor Donna Giovanna was too much overcome by fear to do aught but sit on the floor weeping bitterly, but when her husband bade her bring all her courage to bear and be ready for flight if necessary, since the fear was that they might be burnt out, she rose tremblingly, and throwing herself in his arms, entreated him to take her at once out of the Palace.

Her voice was deafened by the tumult from without. The great door was ablaze at last, and a thousand voices proclaimed the fact with loud huzzas and shouts of triumph.

Corso, from his vantage point, caught sight of clouds of smoke and flying sparks, and wondered how soon the whole building would be a burning mass. But the flames sank and sputtered, and gradually expired. There was a strong section of the crowd who, though equally desirous with the rest to force an entrance, did not wish the building to be destroyed. A blazing palace, though a fine enough spectacle in its way, gave less zest to their souls than the thought of murder and rapine. It would be more satisfactory to seize Corso and slay him themselves than merely to let him

perish in the flames, and the Palace contained treasures which they were still cool-headed enough to remember.

Water was brought and poured by them on the burning door before the flames had spread within, but the woodwork was sufficiently damaged for one great blow from the arm of Pecora now to do its work. With a crash which echoed through the building, the great door of the Bargello fell in at last.

A scene of indescribable confusion followed. Over the charred and still smouldering remains swarmed a horde of men and women, ruled only by their own ungoverned passions. Some fell prone as they advanced, only to be trampled upon, or kicked aside, by those behind. Men and women alike were intoxicated with the worst passions of human nature. Through the apartments of the Palace they pressed, here seizing its treasures and booty, there ruthlessly destroying them, pausing only to fight with each other, or to sing wild snatches of obscene songs. For the moment the lust for rapine and destruction superseded even the lust for blood.

The terrified servants and officials of the household made such resistance as they could, but were speedily disarmed and secured by the superior number opposed to them, and over the whole building the populace swarmed without let or hindrance. Some reached the stables and led the frightened horses away through the very midst of the state apartments; others penetrated to the wine cellar, and drank until they sank down where they were in stupified sleep, or, flagon in hand, reeled through the building crying vaguely for the blood of Corso Donati and of the Podestà.

Yet another section did still more serious mischief,

for, penetrating to the official apartments, they made a raid on the State papers, and burnt all they could find, thus destroying many indictments against members of their own class, and causing endless subsequent confusion and disorder in the State.

And now at last, with appetites sated by rapine, the thirst for bloodshed swept over them once more, and again was raised the cry—

"Perish the Podestà! Perish Corso Donati! Let them and theirs be slain!"

The cry passed rapidly from one member of the crowd to another, and a number of them now swarmed up the great staircase in search of the objects of their hate and fury, who, if encountered, would in all probability have been torn to pieces at their hands. The locked outer door of the suite of apartments which had concealed the party of the Podestà was at length reached, and with shouts and curses forced open. Finding the apartment within vacant, they sped on with redoubled zeal to the next, to meet with the same result, and thus reached at last the inner chamber, which had actually sheltered the Podestà's party, to find that also deserted.

With a howl of baffled rage, the leaders of the mob flung themselves against the door on to the staircase. It was securely bolted on the outer side, but it yielded after some time to the pressure of a dozen shoulders against it, and the eager, angry crowd was precipitated down the stairway beyond. The great door at the foot was bolted on the inside, and no sign anywhere was seen of the fugitives, and after a few minutes spent on the fruitless search, a rush was made back to the Palace in the hope of securing fresh loot.

Meanwhile, the sounds of the approaching tumult had reached the little party hidden in the Palace, and as the sounds of shouts, and songs, and trampling feet, announced that the crowd were actually within, and might at any moment be on them, a hastily planned flight was resolved upon as the lesser danger of the two.

The crowd had now dispersed from the entrance at the foot of the private staircase, attracted to the main entrance or to the inside of the Palace, and when the door was opened the street beyond was almost clear. With the Podestà leading, and the two women of the party placed for security between him and Corso, the little band emerged from the Palace, but almost immediately a chance straggler near by caught sight of Corso, and raised a cry against him, which speedily gave echo to an answering yell. At this Lucia, who was immediately in front of him, turned round and almost pushed him back into the building.

"By the staircase and on to the roof," she panted. "Leave us, for you but imperil us more, and while they are after thee, we can make good our escape. Haste, haste, ere the crowd hath time to rally."

Acting on this advice, the force of which he could not fail to see, Corso barred the entrance from within, and with rapid steps gained the top of the staircase, whence a trap door led out on to the roof. There from behind a buttress he saw his companions in flight make their way unmolested round the corner to a neighbouring palace where they would receive shelter.

Meanwhile the news sped rapidly to those inside the Palace that Corso had not escaped from it, and a rush was once more made to the staircase. This time a more

thorough search was instituted. Corso from his hiding-place heard with feelings of dread, such as had never assailed him in the fiercest battle, the approach of those hurrying steps up the staircase, the low hoarse murmur of rage and hate. To die in the thick of the fight with a good honest arrow in your heart was indeed a better fate than to be caught thus in a trap and slain as a hunted animal. Nearer and nearer came the sounds, and he knew in another minute that the desperate, blood-thirsty crowd would be upon him, and what could he do alone and unarmed against it? If only he could keep the trap door weighted so that they could not open it! But it was useless to attempt that. His own body would be powerless against the force of the other side, and even if not, a lighted torch would soon do the deed. Had he but one strong weapon, he might by the good use of his arm retain possession of it, and hurl down one after another of the enemy as they approached. With frantic hands he tore at a piece of the masonry in a wild, hopeless endeavour to get it loose. His hands were wounded and bleeding, but still the solid stone remained unmoved. And now they were actually at the trap door, and there was no longer time for delay, and as it burst open and the first wild angry face appeared above it, Corso, with an almost superhuman effort, fled to the furthest corner of the roof and hid behind a buttress. Perhaps, after all, they might not see him, and then he might escape. But the hope was vain. A wild cry of exultant triumph, a lust for blood, rose from one of the crowd, proving at once that his hiding-place was discovered. He gazed round with wild, distracted eyes. One way of escape, and only one, seemed to remain

to him. Below his present hiding-place, a narrow street, hardly more than a passage, separated the Bargello from a neighbouring palace. By standing on the edge of a huge gargoyle near, it would be just possible to leap to the adjoining roof. The action was desperate and fraught with the gravest peril, but at the worst fall to the pavement below would be better than death at the hands of the mob. With one gigantic effort he nerved himself to the task, and without daring to contemplate the dizzy depths below, made the leap. He had missed, he was falling headlong, so it seemed to him for one breathless second. In the next, he had caught hold of a projecting buttress with the frantic clutch of a drowning man, and swung himself into safety. Panting, dizzy, with torn clothes and hands streaming with blood, he rose and fled over the roof and thus to another beyond which adjoined the one he was on, and reached shelter at last. But the crowd which had rushed towards him with wild shouts and imprecations, gazed in awestruck silence at his desperate leap, and there was not one who showed the least inclination to follow.

"He is in league with the Devil," said one, crossing himself, and the belief that he must indeed be supernaturally assisted, gained rapid ground. The fierce passion which had animated the crowd sank suddenly before a sense of overwhelming awe, and in silence it returned the way it had come.

Thus did Corso Donati make his first escape from the wrath of the Florentines.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE LAST SERVICE TO FLORENCE

By nightfall Florence had quieted down for the moment, but the state of confusion into which she had plunged was by no means really over. The first step taken by the Council of the Republic towards restoring order was to compensate to Lucino da Como for the loss of property he had sustained, and to dismiss him; the second, to dismiss the ruling Priors without waiting for their term of office to expire, and to appoint others in their place. The populace were, however, only partly appeased by these steps, and in the restless state of public feeling a ready object for vituperation was found in the person of della Bella.

The excitement in the town simmered only, but still simmered, and a mere spark was all that was needed to set the whole of it ablaze with revolution.

In the privacy of his own house the once popular leader remained hidden from the public gaze. Consumed with the longing to go forth, as was his wont, in the midst of the people, he yet dared not do so, since by this means he might further jeopardise not his own person, of which he took little thought, but the peace and safety which he had so earnestly striven to obtain for the State. How far, indeed, his name was actually associated

in public opinion with the recent outbreak, he did not yet know, but his own better judgment, to which he had often, alas ! paid insufficient heed, warned him that his appearance in the midst of the city at the present juncture, would be but adding fuel to the smouldering fires.

He was seated alone on the evening of the third day after the riot, a prey to bitter thoughts. Over his soul swept the memory of the bright hopes he had cherished of a happy, peaceful Florence, of his struggles and toil, and unceasing efforts to provide the people whom he loved so dearly with a rule of freedom and equity. And now, he saw the stately edifice of his dreams fall about him in a hideous mass of ruins. The old love of action swept over him next, and by its futility added a fresh poignancy to his grief. Floods of eloquence, words of burning appeal, rose up from his heart, and kindled still further the ardent longing to rush out and address the people, to try once more the force of that magnetic influence which formerly had so easily swayed them.

Alas ! that power seemed to have deserted him now. The burning words would echo back with a dreary, dead sound alone, instead of in waves of answering emotion from other hearts.

How, he asked himself, had he failed ; what wrong had he done that thus his noblest endeavours were frustrated ? And back with a stab of remorse came the memory of Leonora's warning voice months before, and of the fierce impetuosity which had refused to listen to anything but his own impulsive desires.

But yet he had loved the people ; surely no one had

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ever loved them as he. Even now, when he was deserted and probably betrayed, would he not gladly go forth and serve them, even by his death if need be? A hope sprang up in his heart with this thought.

Perhaps still the opportunity might come, perhaps even now it might be his high privilege, to shed his blood for Florence, and by so doing to save her yet.

The door opened softly, and Leonora stood before him. Her face was pale, and the beautiful curves of her mouth showed signs of suffering, but in her deep eyes shone the same steadfast light as of old.

She knelt by her father for whom her love, like all true women's love, was even deeper and more tender in his adversity.

"Dear father," she whispered, "do not sit here alone in melancholy foreboding. It can do no good, and things may mend soon. The city already begins to quiet down."

"So hath a storm often quieted," he replied, "ere its fiercest outburst. Alas! thou knowest not the temper of the people. They are thirsting still for the bloodshed of which they were baulked the other day. They have thrown off all restraint. They no longer acknowledge any leadership but their own passions. What is the end to be?"

"Their passions will wear themselves out," she said, "and then——"

"Well, then?" he asked impatiently.

"One must begin with them all over again."

"Never," he cried passionately, "never! I have learnt my lesson, though perchance too late. Not by placing power in their own hands are the people to be rightly served. It is not from the nobles that they need

to be saved, but from themselves, not from oppression from without, but from brute passion within. I have treated this popolani whom I loved as an over-indulgent father treats a favourite child. I have given them all they asked, I have served them in every way. With what result? Their undoing and my own. And to Florence, Florence my beloved mistress, what have I given? I who sought to restore peace and harmony, and a quiet rule, have seen instead discord and strife, and an injustice worse than was formerly hers."

A sob rose in his throat, and he paused. At the same moment a hasty knock was heard outside, and Dino Compagni entered.

Della Bella met him with that courtesy which even his present sufferings were powerless to destroy.

"Welcome, good Dino," he said, pressing the hand of the future historian warmly. "What news?"

"Alas!" said the young man, with downcast glances, "little that is cheering for me to relate, or for you to hear. The city, though outwardly calm, is in reality in a state of anarchy, and, woe is me to say it, but it is thy name which is the cause of strife."

"How so?" cried della Bella. "Speak, I beseech, nay command, and conceal nothing."

"The new Priors accuse you of being the real cause of the outrage at the Bargello," replied Dino; "the nobles and the popolani grassi agree with them."

He paused in hesitation whether to proceed, but he had not yet told the tidings which he knew would fall the heaviest on della Bella's soul.

"And the popolani," asked the latter, hoarsely. "What say they?"

"They call you traitor," was the reply. "Led by that ruffian, Pecora, they accuse you of siding with the nobles and of trying to quell the tumult which, according to them, you should have been the first to lead."

"They are blind, mad!" cried della Bella, springing to his feet, stung to the quick by the words as the love of popularity, which had been one of his weaknesses in the past, asserted itself again over his soul.

"I will go forth on the instant," he continued. "Nay, Leonora, seek not to restrain me. I will speak to them once more face to face, even if it be for the last time. They shall admit their mistake and eat their words before me. Once more when I stand before them they shall acknowledge Giano della Bella as the upholder of justice and the friend of the people."

"Father, father," said Leonora's gentle voice. "Canst not see that it is useless? They will but slay thee, in their present temper."

"Let them slay me," he said. "If I cannot save Florence, at least let my blood stain her stones; at least let me give my life for the cause I have served. Freely would I give my blood. It were but a small service to render."

He moved towards the door, but his progress thither was barred by the form of Compagni, who gazed at him with eyes of anguish and pity.

"Florence demands a greater service than that from the most faithful of her sons," he said.

"Greater than my life? Nay, man, let me go. Thou hast not understood. What greater service can I render her than to die for her?"

"To leave her," said Dino.

Della Bella staggered as if struck by a heavy blow.

"Leave her, leave Florence!" he gasped. "Dost thou in truth mean that? What help could that be to her? How could I serve her, if away?"

"Your departure from the city can alone, I fear, restore to her the peace and prosperity for which you strive," said Dino, sadly. "Your presence in her midst is but a cause for fresh controversy, fresh strife. Should you appear on the side of the popolani, the better class citizens, the popolani grassi, disgusted with the excesses already committed, will speedily ally themselves with the nobles, and an oligarchy will be formed. If, on the other hand, you refuse to commit yourself as an accomplice with the perpetrators of the recent outrage, they will be driven at once to fresh excesses, and all the horrors of a revolution will sweep over our beloved State. If you love Florence, Messer Giano, I can only repeat that you can best serve her by leaving her."

Della Bella sank into his seat once more and hid his face. For a few minutes a deathlike silence prevailed.

"If I love her," he cried at length, "if I love her! Was I not born and bred in her midst; is she not part of the very fibre of my being? Alas! Florence, my native land, my home, have I served thee so ill that it hath come to this? Must I leave thee, torn by fierce factions, with overbearing oppression awaiting thee on one hand, and outrage and rapine on the other? Is there no other way to serve thee but to go?"

"It is the best way," repeated Dino, gently.

Again a profound silence fell on the little group. Giano sat with hidden face, and Dino Compagni turned aside that he might not witness the struggle which must, he knew, be tearing that passionate soul in twain.

But at her father's side stood Leonora, watching over him as his guardian angel might have done, her eyes glowing with the passionate anxiety of one who awaits an issue which will mean the triumph or the defeat of a noble soul.

On what Giano passed through in those minutes, which to the faithful two beside him seemed like years, it is useless to enter. Over the depths of anguish, the struggle between all the instincts and impulses natural to him, and the still deeper inherent nobility and disinterestedness of his soul, let a veil be drawn. When, at last, he raised his eyes, the greatest conflict of his life had been won, and the most difficult task of all to an ardent eager nature, the task of renunciation, accomplished.

But his countenance bore but slight traces of the terrible struggle through which he had passed, and it was in much the same tones as usual that he spoke.

"Make ready with all speed for a journey," he said calmly to Leonora. "We will start the day after to-morrow for Lyons. My business connection with the house of Pazzi there will ensure us a welcome in the town."

Leonora rose to obey, and as Dino Compagni followed her to the door he said in a low, compassionate tone :

"If there is aught I can do for you, Donna Leonora, ere you depart, command me, I pray."

With a sudden impulse, she replied :

"Go then and find Messer Filippo Donati, and bid him come to me for a few minutes to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXVIII

A FAREWELL

THE rapid course of events, which, after the arrest of Corso, had had such important results for Florence, had also deeply affected the character of Filippo.

The ambitious designs of Corso and Lucia, which were no longer to be concealed now that their fulfilment seemed within more measurable distance, excited in the young man a burning desire to save his native land from all possibility of a rule which he was convinced could bring nothing but evil to it, and this passion of patriotism swallowed up for the moment even the thoughts of his private revenge. At the same time his spirit suffered torture in the daily presence of Lucia, for whom he experienced an instinctive aversion which was due to other causes besides resentment at his father having placed her so soon in his own mother's position. He shrank from her with all the revulsion which causes what is noble to recoil from baseness and vice, and did not fail also to see that Corso's nature was rapidly degenerating under the influence of his wife, and that the last traces of his patriotism were fast becoming absorbed in personal ambition and sensual passion.

On this dark atmosphere of both his home and political surroundings, the message from Leonora came like a sudden breath of fresh, sweet air to a fever-stricken man,

reminding him that pure and gracious things still existed, though he had no longer any part in them.

She still cared for him, he told himself, or she would not have bidden him to come to her, and the thought was balm to his spirit, though it brought back the painful realization that the barrier between his soul and hers was insurmountable.

His heart had ached for her and for his friend della Bella, in the sorrow and disappointment that the revolution must, he knew, have brought to them both, and he longed to have been able to share their grief, as at one time he would have done. But though he saw that della Bella's downfall was imminent, he had not heard of their speedy departure from Florence until Leonora told him.

"It is for this that I have sent for you, Filippo," she said. "Who can tell if ever we shall see each other again?"

She had met him with a calm manner that might have been that of a sister, but her voice trembled a little as she said these words.

"You will come back to Florence," said Filippo, hoarsely. "Surely, when the tumult is over, della Bella can return in safety."

"He himself clings to that hope," she said, "but I think in his heart he knows it will not be. Once cast forth from Florence, I do not think that they will ask him to return. The people do not wish for the leadership of one so noble and so disinterested as he. We go to Lyons," she went on; "there is a business branch of the Pazzi house there, and with it, as you know, my father has relations, and there, far from the reminder of our bitter disappointments, we shall find shelter and peace."

"And happiness?" he asked.

"I think that perhaps life is not meant for happiness," she said, simply. "We are given glimpses of it only to teach our souls the meaning of the word, to learn that such a thing exists. Perhaps it would not be for our good to have happiness with us always. Life is meant to teach us I think, that is all, and happiness is only one part of the lesson."

"Leonora, my heart aches for you. You are too good to suffer."

"Oh! say not so, dear Filippo. I am not good. I am a very weak and faulty woman, and as for suffering do not pity me too much. There is something which I think may be better than mere joy. I mean the blessedness which truth and faithfulness to duty can bring. Besides, is it not something to have learnt at least what happiness is? Is it not something, dear Filippo," she added with a sudden radiance, "that we have met and loved? Nothing, no fate, however cruel, can take from us that memory and that possession."

"Leonora, the sight of your sweet face, the sound of your dear voice, fills my heart once more with the dreams of youth. Some day even yet, I may stand before you freed from the burden of my vow, and claim you as mine at last."

"Ah! Filippo," she said, "think not that I speak from personal motive, but often I wonder whether you are right to cling to that oath, whether it were not better even to break a sacred vow than to let your soul be shut out from the light of heaven."

He shook his head.

"I cannot free my soul from it," he replied. "When I think of my blessed mother's tenderness and goodness,

when I see the woman whose beauty hath an evil charm, whose fair form clothes, I am certain, a corrupt and wicked spirit, when I see her, I say, at my father's side, in the place of that gentle presence whose memory I worship, my soul grows so dark that there is no room in it for daylight. And though the chances of freeing myself from my vow would seem to grow less and less as time goes on, yet an inner voice, which I cannot stifle nor ignore, bids me be patient. How, I know not, but I have a growing conviction that proofs of my father's guilt or innocence will come at last, and for this I must wait and watch. Meanwhile, it shall be my task to guard the sacred cause of liberty in Florence, to watch, and scheme, and plan to circumvent whatever of evil my father may be led to contemplate, instigated, I make little doubt, by the vile influence of his wife. And while I am thus employed, the thought that at the same time I may be helping, however imperfectly, to carry out your father's cherished ideals, will be my greatest hope and best support. My prospects of being able to work for Florence seem promising. I am marked out already as valuable by both parties, and in this way may have opportunities of frustrating schemes of tyranny in either—the tyranny of despotism on the one hand, and the equal tyranny of an uncontrolled democracy on the other. Even now I have been chosen out to go on a delicate mission to Rome itself."

"To Rome!" she exclaimed. "By whom sent?"

"By the retiring Podestà, Messer Lucino da Como. He sent for me directly after the attack on the Bargello and told me that he wished to send me to the Pope. There I am to lay before his Holiness the exact state of

affairs here, and suggest to him that the presence of legate with power to place all Florence under an interdiction would be the best means of reducing it to order. The people will tremble beneath the fear of the Church's sentence, and in the calm that will ensue peace may be restored."

"It is an honour that you should be chosen on this errand, Filippo," she said. "But have a care as thou goest, for a messenger from Florence at this present time will be a marked man."

"I shall take two armed retainers with me," said Filippo, "and as for personal danger, would you have me consider that when the welfare of Florence is at stake?"

"How she inspires devotion in her sons!" exclaimed Leonora. "There is my father, willing not only to die for her, but to do what is so much harder, to renounce her, perchance for ever. There is yourself, filled with the same ardour of devotion, and Florence can count others by the score. Among them are our friends, Dino Compagni and the young Dante Alighieri, whose souls burn as yours does to purge her and purify her, and restore her to a true and just rule based on equity and freedom, even as my father dreamt of doing. His best comfort in his sorrow and exile will be to think of the younger spirits ready to rise up and follow in his footsteps, and to serve Florence as faithfully as he hath done."

"And my best comfort in the task of doing it will be the thought of his example and of your love, Leonora. Though life sweeps our paths asunder, if only for a time, and the evil deeds and passions of others have caught us in their meshes, on the darkness of my path one

light will ever shine. Your love, Leonora, shall be my guiding-star, reminding me that faith, and purity, and noble ideals exist, when the passions of revenge and hatred threaten to overwhelm me in the evil atmosphere which reigns now in my home. In the dark and stormy events of the political life outside it into which I must plunge, the thought of you will come like a pure breath from God's own heaven. You shall be my beacon and my guide through life, even if we should meet no more."

"Filippo," she whispered, "you make me almost happy. And now, dear friend, you must leave me. Farewell!"

Their hands met, but between them was, as it were, the corpse of their earlier passion, and to Filippo it seemed as though the cool caressing touch of Leonora was more like that of a disembodied spirit than of a living woman. With a gesture of tender reverence he raised her hand for one moment to his lips.

"Ah! Leonora," he replied, as he turned away, "would that I knew if these eyes will ever behold thee more."

CHAPTER XXIX

TREASON DISCLOSED

Six years had passed since the revolution which drove della Bella from Florence, and in that time much had happened. Della Bella himself had never returned to the city he had loved so dearly and striven so faithfully to serve. Like most dreamers of an ideal in a world of base passions, he had seen the noble fabric he sought to raise crumble into ruins, in whose fall he himself was crushed. His departure from Florence was followed, not by that recall of which he had cherished a glimmering hope in his darkest hour, but by sentence of banishment and confiscation of property, and as was to be the fate later on of another of Florence's noblest sons, he died far from the birthplace which cast him forth, but could not slay his love for her.

In Florence the rule of the turbulent mob had been superseded by that of the middle class or popolani grassi, led by Vieri dei Cerchi, and for a time the state knew a peace and prosperity which had long been absent. But this year, 1300, was again to be a memorable one in her history.

To Corso Donati those six years since his acquittal had been years of watchful waiting, most irksome to his eager, impulsive spirit, and Lucia's strong assurance that his day of triumph would come had lately begun

to be interspersed with moods of bitter despondency, in which she taunted her lord for the delay in raising her to that pinnacle of splendour to which she had looked forward on her marriage. Her beauty was still capable of exciting in Corso the same passion as of old, but in calmer moments there was a barrier between him and the woman at his side, which filled him almost with loathing, not only of her, but of himself. He had never forgotten the dark day when the news of Filippo's death at the hands of assassins had been brought back by the retainers, who had accompanied him on his journey to Rome, and the crime to which, in a weak moment, he had tacitly consented, came with a shock of horror when it was actually accomplished. Filippo was dangerous, and there was little doubt that he entertained dark suspicions as to his mother's death, but Corso was not yet so deeply sunk in villainy for this quenching of the young vigorous life, this murder of his own flesh and blood, not to fill him with dismay. With the sophistry of guilt, he had persuaded himself that Lucia's suggestion would bear no fruits except that of sending his son far from Florence on the chance of his finding permanent employment away from the parental roof, and when he was confronted with the actual proof of his wife's wickedness, and felt that he should see his son no more, even his passion for her was for a time almost swamped in a rush of grief and horror. It needed all her arts, as Lucia perceived, to hold her place with him ; but though Corso's passion was less constant than before, she had not lost her power, and there were times when her beauty exercised over him the same fascination as of old.

There was a bitter disappointment to both husband and wife in the fact that no children had come to bless the union founded on so much evil. To Lucia the prospect of maternity would have brought none of the tender joy which is one of the crowns of a woman's life, but she deplored the absence of what would have been helpful to strengthen her position with Corso, for, as she knew, he had hoped by his children to improve his political position and make great alliances. This disappointment, though seldom alluded to, rankled in both hearts, and combined with the memory of past crimes and present political failure, to fill each with secret dissatisfaction. But the calm trend of affairs which was so unfavourable for Corso's schemes was not long to last in Florence, and events were approaching which were to have very varying effects on his tempestuous career. Circumstances in the neighbouring town of Pistoia at this time gave an opportunity for those who, like Corso, assumed the guise of loyal Florentines while working only for their own self-aggrandisement.

A quarrel, caused in the first place by a second marriage and the fierce jealousy and bitter hate which, as so often happens, had sprung up between the children of the two wives, arose between two sections of a family called the Cancellieri. They were known as the Blacks and the Whites, the latter name being after one of the wives, who bore the baptismal name of Bianca.

In the year 1300, the feud between these two parties and their followers became so fierce in Pistoia that the Florentine government rashly took over the lordship of the town in a vain attempt to make peace. This unwise step was speedily followed by a still more unwise

proceeding. The leaders of both the Black and White factions were invited into Florence. In this foolish course of action on the part of his enemies, Corso and other nobles saw their chance, and they took every means to bring about a state of discord which might lead to a change in the government. The discord soon arose, the quarrel of the Blacks and Whites from Pistoia was but transplanted to Florence, and the whole city was soon divided into two hostile camps.

In the fierce party spirit thus created, Donati and Vieri dei Cerchi found themselves, naturally, face to face as leaders of opposing forces, Corso being placed at the head of the Black party and Cerchi at the head of the White.

At the close of the year much quarrelling and bloodshed had taken place, but the party of the Cerchi still ruled Florence, and Donati, urged thereto by Lucia, resolved on a desperate policy which was to have serious results for Florence and for himself.

In December of that year, 1300, the Priors were seated in their Council Chamber late one evening, when a messenger interrupted them.

"There is a man craving immediate audience of your lordships," he said.

"Tell him this is not our time for audiences," said one of the number. "We are engrossed with important affairs of state."

The messenger hesitated for a second.

"But in truth he declares that his errand is of the utmost importance and brooks no delay," he said.

"Who is he?" asked the Prior. "Does he give any name or describe the nature of his business?"

"His name, he says, is Brother Sebastian," answered the messenger. "But as to his business, he says it is for the ears of your worships alone."

At the head of the Council, in the President's chair, sat a man whose striking physiognomy marked him out as one well fitted to take the lead among his fellows. Portraits have made posterity familiar with the lofty brow lined by deep marks, even at this time, of melancholy and thought, with the aquiline and slightly hooked nose, the deepset piercing eyes, the drooping mouth, with the slightly protruding underlip; but no portrait can give an idea of the fires which burnt in those deep eyes, or of the inner radiance which shone forth on the pale ascetic features like a light within an alabaster lamp. Nor could portrait convey what was one of the most striking characteristics of the man—the curious air of detachment, the atmosphere of isolation and aloofness which seemed to cut him off from the mass of ordinary men.

In the discussion about the messenger this man had apparently taken no part, being absorbed in some state papers in front of him referring to the Salt Impost Department, in which a grave public fraud had been recently discovered, the head of this department, Messer Duronte de Chiaramontesi, having reduced the size of the bushel measure in order to appropriate the balance of salt to his own enrichment.*

But at the name of Brother Sebastian he raised his head with a swift glance at the messenger. "Show him in," he said.

One of the other Priors, named Sinibaldi, laughed.

* See Dante, *Pur.* xii., 105, and *Par.* xvi., 103.

"Perchance the report which credits you yourself with belonging secretly to the tertiary order of S. Francis is not so far wrong as most of dame Gossip's reports, Messer Dante," he said. "You seem to show an unwonted interest in this friar."

"Peace!" said Dante, sternly. "This is no time for jest when the affairs of Florence are at stake. Enough that I know Brother Sebastian, and that he may have matter of import to convey. Bid him enter," he added, nodding to the messenger.

The next minute a man entered who wore the dress of a friar, though had his cowl been thrown back it would have been seen that the mark of the tonsure was not present on his thick, dark hair. He kept his cowl, however, well over his face, while beneath it could only dimly be discerned a pair of keen eyes, a long black beard, and a face which bore the impress of being marked rather by suffering than by age.

"Greeting, brother," said Dante, motioning him to a seat.

"What is your business? I would beg of you to be brief, for we have matters which do not brook delay claiming our attention, but from the nature of your plea for a hearing I conclude that you have matter of import to the state to impart."

"News I have of the direst import," said the friar, in a deep, penetrating voice; "nothing less in fact than of treason itself. There are traitors in our midst who already plan negotiations with a foreign power."

A murmur of horrified indignation greeted his words.

"Proceed," said Dante. "Your proof and all particulars."

"I have come from a meeting of conspirators," proceeded the friar. "It came to my knowledge that they were to assemble to-night in the Church of Santa Trinità, and I contrived to be there concealed, and overheard their plans. A messenger is to be despatched forthwith to the Pope to enlist his support, and, ere we know where we are, Charles of Valois, the brother of the king of France, may be at our gates."

The excited Priors sprang to their feet and hands were laid on swords.

"Down with the traitors! Death to the traitors!" they cried. "Our sacred liberties shall never be sold to a foreign prince."

"Truly, should the French prince once enter, our liberties would be at an end," said the friar. "He would overturn the government by force, bring into power the Blacks and the nobles, and place Corso Donati at the head of the state."

"Down with Corso. Death to that haughty tyrant. The Baron of Ill-fame shall never rule over Florence," cried various voices.

In the excitement and clamour which ensued no one could be distinctly heard, but now a hand was clapped heavily on the table and Dante's voice was raised above the tumult.

"Silence! gentlemen," he cried. "By much talking and the wagging of many tongues little has ever been accomplished. Let us stand firm as the towers of our own buildings, against which all the outside storms may spend their force in vain, and discuss quietly and in concert what is the best course we can pursue as guardians of the state. Brother Sebastian, can you,

in the first place, give us the names of the conspirators ? ”

“ Some I failed to recognise,” he said, “ for there were about twenty present in all, but prominent were members of the Spini, Tosinghi, and Cariccuili families, and the principal leaders were Rossellino della Tosa and——” —here the speaker seemed for a moment to pause as if a momentary emotion overcame him—
“ and Corso Donati himself.”

“ I warrant,” cried one of the Priors, “ that the Black leader would be the main instigator of it. The double-dyed traitor ! May the foul fiend take his soul.”

“ In truth,” said Dante, “ I think that if there be one lowest depth of all in Hell reserved for the sinners most abhorred by a righteous God it will contain traitors, and that to traitors against their own country will be given Judas Iscariot himself for their eternal companionship. But we are here not to discuss those future punishments prepared beyond the grave, but to endeavour to circumvent the evil deeds which merit them here. In the first place, we must trap the conspirators so as to have proof that we can show of their guilt, and then must we visit condign punishment upon them.”

“ Let us drive them forth from Florence,” said a voice.

“ Yes, that shall at least be their punishment, and Florence shall not harbour those who are as vipers in her bosom. Upon Corso Donati and the other leaders shall be imposed a fine heavy enough to cripple their estates and render them incapable of action. These arch-traitors removed, the party they lead will prove powerless and even if Charles of Valois come, no great

harm need ensue. But, my friends, this is not all; strong, even harsh measures must be applied to purge Florence from the evil in her midst." There was a brief pause, then Dante continued in a sudden outburst of patriotic passion, "Alas! my birthplace! Fain would I spare thee from the evils which thou bringest on thyself. Thou art as one fever-stricken, tossing from side to side and seeking rest in vain. First, it is the people thou wouldst have to rule, then the nobles. Thou knowest not thy own mind." He stopped with a sudden start, realizing that his thoughts were carrying him far away.

"We must not only banish these leaders of the Black party," he pursued. "To show our impartiality and our love of justice, let all those who have taken a leading part in the recent disturbance be exiled. Let Messer Gentile go, and Messer Torrigiano and Carbone and Vieri of the Cerchi. Baldinaccio degli Admimari and some of his family, as well as Naldo dei Gherardini and some of his must also be sent, and Giovanni Malespini must not be spared, nor must Guido Cavalcanti."

The voice broke for a second as he uttered that last well-beloved name, but for the very reason that Cavalcanti was his own dearest friend, must he not be omitted from the list.

"In truth, Messer Dante," said a voice, "this is, verily, that justice that Giano della Bella would fain have introduced to our midst."

"Had he taken such a course as this, perchance he might have succeeded in saving Florence from herself," said Dante. "But peace to his soul, for of

his death in Lyons the news hath but lately reached me."

The friar, who had sat in silence during the recent discussion, gave a swift movement at these words.

"Della Bella dead?" he exclaimed, in a low, eager voice. "Is this in truth the case?"

Dante's keen eye was turned on him.

"There is no doubt as to that," he replied. "I had the news from a reliable source. Did you know him, Brother Sebastian?"

The friar hastily pulled himself together. "What Florentine did not?" was the guarded reply. "Would, indeed, that there were more men like him."

"And now," continued Dante, "there is one more matter to consider. Would it not be well to send an embassy on our part to his Holiness, urging him to oppose the coming of the French prince, even if it be already suggested that he come, or, on the other hand, if the decision go against us on this point, to endeavour to enlist his aid on our side, so that the Prince's coming may be a means of restoring peace, rather than of stirring up strife? What say you, gentlemen?"

There was a murmur of assent to this proposal.

"There is but one other point," said one of the other Priors, "and that is one which it may perhaps be as well to discuss at the present time. To whom," he asked, turning to the others, "should this delicate mission to the Pope be entrusted? Which among us is best fitted to undertake it?"

There was a brief pause; then a voice, to be immediately followed by others, named Dante.

"Ay, Messer Dante is the one to go," said the first speaker, "yet methinks we can ill spare him from our

councils just now. What say you, yourself, Messer Dante, as to the matter ? ”

Dante had received, unmoved, the suggestion that he should be chosen for the mission to Rome, though his brow was slightly knit as though in thought.

Looking round the Council-chamber, and in a rapid glance summing up the powers of the others present, he now gave utterance to the thought which troubled him.

“ If I go, who stays ; if I stay, who goes ? ” he said, speaking as though he were merely giving voice to his own thoughts. There was no trace of self-consciousness, still less of vanity, in that utterance which has become historic. It was the plain unvarnished truth that he uttered ; the simple expression of the problem which agitated him of how he could be spared for the mission, which he knew he was so much better fitted to undertake than anyone else. And the desire to decide as was best for his country, cast aside all petty thoughts of self, or of how his words might be misconstrued by those less lofty-minded than himself.

Nevertheless, ill though he could indeed be spared, it was to him that the mission was entrusted, as he himself realised, since he alone seemed to be fitted for it. And thus when the day dawned on which Florence had the greatest need of all her most able sons, the ablest and most faithful of them was absent, and the gates which closed behind him on that journey were, as all know, never opened to him again.*

* Doubt as to Dante having left Florence on the mission in question, and his absence from Florence at the time that the sentence of exile was pronounced against him, has been cast by Scartazzini, though tradition, founded on statements by Dino Compagni and Boccaccio, has long been accepted as fact.

CHAPTER XXX

"BEWARE OF THE FRIAR!"

A FEW days later, Corso was pacing angrily up and down one of the large and handsome apartments of the Donati Palace. From a seat in one of the recessed windows Lucia watched him with pale face and anxious eyes, and near her stood Simone with downcast glances.

From the attitude and expression of all it was easy to see that something unpleasant of importance had occurred.

At length Corso stopped his angry walk and stood still, facing his wife and son.

"I will be even with them yet," he cried. "Florence shall not banish Corso Donati for nothing. She shall learn that the viper from outside can sting as well as the one in her midst."

"Father," cried Simone, advancing with clenched hand, "I will stay here and avenge you."

"Avenge me!" cried Corso, stung to a passion that turned him against even his beloved son. "Who talks of being avenged? I seek not to be avenged, but to conquer—Florence shall live to rue the day when she sent me forth, but the hour of her downfall shall be the one of my triumph. She shall lie low at my feet, and over her bowed neck shall I ride, spurning her as I do so."

"Have you no love for your country?" asked Simone.
"Is Florence herself of no account?"

"I love her in truth," said Corso, "but as a man who loves a mistress too proud to be won save by force—she is of account to me, of the greatest account, because by her alone can I rise to the height which I intend to occupy. I wonder," he went on, pacing the room again, "who the traitor could have been who bore the news of that plot first to the Council Chamber. Some vile wretch must have betrayed us."

"Was there no spy hidden in the church, think you?" asked Simone.

"It was searched before the meeting, and no one found save one friar mumbling his prayers in a confessional, and he was sent away."

"But went he forth?" asked Lucia, joining the conversation for the first time, "or did he remain in hiding, think you?"

"Nay, he went, unless he had some secret hiding place that escaped us. But 'tis not likely."

"What was his appearance?" asked Lucia.

"I did not see his face, which was quite hidden by his cowl, but he seemed to be a man not very far advanced in life, though he spoke with that peculiar pitch of voice affected by friars and men of that ilk."

"I have seen a friar whose appearance I like not hovering about," said Lucia. "Once he watched me as I went forth to enter my litter, but turned hurriedly away when he thought I was looking. Moreover, Corso, I have been told that such a one hath been seen to follow you more than once to meetings, and that he is known as Brother Sebastian—Corso, beware of the friar."

"Of Brother Sebastian have I myself often heard speak lately," said Simone. "He is said to be a spy and to know much that is supposed to be secret. Which side he is really on is, however, matter of conjecture, though most say he is hand in glove with the government."

"He is of little consequence to me now, at any rate," said Corso, "and, spy or no spy, our messenger will be at Rome before he can be overtaken. His Holiness hath, I am told, already sent for Charles of Valois to help him in the Sicilian war against the Spanish, and even yet, with this powerful ally, all will go well. I myself shall speed at once to Rome."

"Take me with you, Corso," said Lucia, moving to wards him. "Take me with you out of this hateful Florence which hath turned against us. I would leave it till the bitter hour hath passed, and return to see it suffer the punishment it has so richly deserved."

As she stood before him, Corso fixed his eyes on the graceful swaying form and on the beauty which had once stirred his senses so profoundly, and some of his former passion swept over him.

"Would that I did not need to leave you," he said, leading her to a seat and motioning to Simone to withdraw; "but, Lucia, there would be no place for a woman by my side in this undertaking. Much you may do for me here in watching over our property and keeping all ready for my return, and here you must remain in safety."

"Corso, do not leave me behind," she whispered. "I would be with you at this as at all times. Take me with you out of this Florence I am learning to hate, and let me not enter it again until you return as a conqueror."

"That you shall best see if you wait for me here," said Corso. "Who knows how I shall return? and if I come as I dream, with the sword of the avenger in my hand, then no woman should be at my side. Curse Florence! curse her!" he cried, in sudden unrestrained passion. "She should have been at my feet ere this, yet am I always thwarted. But she shall learn the might of Corso's arm in the end." He gave a short laugh. "My sword shall be bright with the blood of her children and my way shall be illuminated with the flames of their homes. Blood and fire shall be the signs with which I shall claim and subdue her. I shall spare none. Not only brave men, to whom the battle is as strong wine, shall fall before me. My sword shall be no distinguisher of persons. Age and sex shall not weigh with me. The women and the children—even babes at the mothers' breasts, shall feel the cold kiss of my steel, and thus shall Corso Donati reply to the insult of Florence."

"Corso, Corso, my king. I love you best like this," cried Lucia, in wicked admiration. "This is the great spirit still unsubdued before which Florence shall tremble like a leaf, and then Corso, then there will be a crown surely yet for your brow and for mine."

"Woman, woman," cried Corso, kissing her fiercely; "is not love enough, that you still crave a crown as well?"

"I would have both," she answered; "but if you indeed love me as of old, I will strive to be content. Is it not indeed for your brow, not mine own, I most crave a crown? Corso, say that you are not tired of me, that my beauty hath not waned." She turned her lustrous eyes on him and the soft breath from her lips

fanned his cheeks, stirring all his senses as of old, and he caught her to him as he had not done for long.

"I would still go to Hell itself for you," he said, breathing hard, and even as he held the soft form, with its curves of voluptuous beauty, to his heart, there rose before him a sudden vision of the days ere he had known this woman, days when he had loved the gentle Agnese and the saintly Piccarda, when Filippo had clung about his knees in childish admiration and love, and when he had still striven to do great and glorious deeds not for his own aggrandisement, but for the good of Florence. Gone were the old days, and those who had made them dear were slain by his own means, if not by his own hand, and instead of the brave-hearted man who had lived then, there was one in whom all evil seemed to find its home. And did not this date from the day when the one poisonous influence had permeated his life, gradually clouding his soul to all save sensual passion and worldly ambition? All this seemed to pass through Corso's brain in a flash; yet he still held Lucia to his heart just as a man will continue to take a drug that he knows is working his ruin.

Then again her soft whispers fell on his ear.

"Don't leave me here, Corso. I shall hate it so without you. Take me at least to my father Ugucione at Lucca."

But at these last words Corso's brow darkened, for already he had incurred much odium from his own party, through this alliance with the daughter of the prominent Ghibelline leader, and such a suggestion was the last one that should have come from the faithful wife of a Guelph and a Donati.

He rose hurriedly, putting Lucia from him as he did so.

"Uguccione is the last protector that the wife of Corso Donati can seek at the present time," he said, angrily. "Do you not know that already the fact of my connection with him is doing me serious harm with the Guelphs of Florence?"

"That is but a small matter compared with the good it will bring you in the end," she said. "My father may yet prove to be a more powerful ally than even Charles of Valois, since Uguccione is ever at hand, while the French prince is here to-day and gone to-morrow. Of what interest, too, is Florence to the Valois? though to the Faggiuola of Lucca an alliance might mean much."

"At the present state of things it would but wreck our party to suggest it," said Corso.

"But to seek the shelter of my father's house would not involve you or your party in anything," she urged; "I should have peace and safety at Lucca, Corso."

"And luxury and power as the daughter of Uguccione, which the wife of the exiled and impoverished Corso can no longer command; is it not so?" he asked bitterly. "The half-closed palace, the absence of display, were worse ills, perchance, for the lady of the Donati house to bear than the absence of her lord."

"Corso," she cried, "you do me wrong. It is because I cannot bear the thought of these walls without the presence of my heart's love that I would go. At Lucca, too, should I not be nearer to catch tidings of you? My heart will be torn with anguish whilst thou art from my side. Corso, my lord! Do I not love thee?"

She drew near to him again and placed a hand caressingly on his arm ; but Corso gently freed himself.

" Nevertheless, it is my wish and my command that you abide here," he said. " Simone will know how to protect you if need arise, but with my departure all danger to you will likewise depart."

The next day, Lucia hung to Corso's neck in an agony of farewell ere he started on his enforced journey. Gently he released himself from her entwining arms, and with one passionate kiss tore himself from the side of her who was the bane of his life, and was to be, to its bitter end.

As he turned for a last glance, she was leaning against the doorway gazing at him with dry, passionate eyes, then, with a gesture as of uncontrollable grief, she raised her hands to her face and turned from him.

Three days later she started for the gay and busy centre of Lucca, where her father's doors were open for her, as she had already taken care to ascertain.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE TRAITOR ENTERS

ON November 5th of the year 1302, the whole of Florence presented a gala appearance. At the corners of many of the streets, stands covered with costly drapery were erected, and the fronts of most of the houses were decorated with tapestries and brocade, and garlands of flowers. Fair ladies were assembled in the stands or grouped at the windows, and the streets were crowded with gay throngs of holiday-makers. In the Piazza in front of the church of S. Maria Novella, the crowd was particularly great and the excitement more intense than elsewhere. Flags and banners of the various guilds representing the trades of Florence fluttered in the breeze, and the black and white bands of the guilds covering the façade of the church itself were overshadowed by a gorgeous canopy on which the French *Fleur-de-lis* was conspicuous in gold against a background of blue velvet.

On the outskirts of the crowd, a woman whose attitude was one of great weariness, looked around her with puzzled eyes, but after one or two ineffectual attempts to press through the crowd she gave up the idea, and with a patient sigh sat down on the steps at the foot of a fountain, where she was too far from the centre of interest to be disturbed.

Another woman standing near, with a child holding her hand, and another hanging to her skirt, turned enquiring glances at her, moved to compassion by something of weariness and sorrow in the attitude, and after a slight hesitation, she drew nearer to her and addressed her.

"You look scarcely fit for merry-making," she said, kindly. "If you take my advice you will return to your home."

"In truth," replied the other, in a voice of great sweetness. "I am here by accident alone. I have come from a long journey and met with many misfortunes, including the illness and death by the way of my faithful servant. On entering Florence, I sought the friends where I expected a shelter, to find they had been banished from Florence. But perhaps you will be good enough to tell me, a stranger, for what object this crowd hath assembled."

"You must indeed be a stranger not to know," replied the first speaker. "Perchance, as you have but now arrived in Florence, you may not even have heard that Messer Charles of Valois, brother to the French king, is lodged in our midst at the Frescobaldi Palace across the Arno."

"In truth, I had heard rumours of this, but nothing more."

"Well, so it is, and to-day he goes in state to S. Maria Novella, accompanied by the Bishop, the Podestà, the Priors and all the other personages of importance, and swears that if the government of the city be entrusted to him he will restore to Florence peace and freedom."

"It is then as a peacemaker that the French Prince comes?"

The first speaker gave a cautious glance round then whispered in the other's ear :

" So 'tis said, but who knows ? My husband is the greatest and wisest man in Florence when he is here, though woe is me ! he is absent just now, and he does not believe in this so-called Peacemaker, even though 'tis by his Holiness himself he is sent. He would have moved heaven and earth to prevent his coming, and 'tis to circumvent his designs that he hath left Florence, for he is convinced that at the bottom of it all is the wicked Black party, led by him well-called the Baron of Ill-Fame, Corso Donati himself. But, look you, they come. I would go nearer, for though I care little for the display, I would that my little Jacopo and Pietro here might see the face of one whom their father may wish them later to remember and to hate. But bide here for me," she added kindly, " I will return to you anon."

She edged her way back in the crowd with the children, who looked at the spectacle with all the eagerness of childhood.

And soon the procession came in sight and, preceded by heralds blowing trumpets, Charles of Valois appeared, mounted on a magnificently caparisoned charger and surrounded by a bodyguard of unarmed Frenchmen. With a forced smile on his weak, crafty countenance, the French prince bowed with the utmost affability on every side as he proceeded to the church, where he was about to take the solemn oaths which already, with all the perfidy of which his base nature was capable, he had arranged to break. After him came the Bishop and other clergy in gorgeous vestments, and then the

Podestà, also mounted, followed by the Priors of the various arts accompanied by members of the city guilds bearing their respective banners. Loud huzzas from French and Florentine throats rose in the air, and the foolish crowd thought to see in this outward amity and rejoicing signs of the restoration of peace to their town. Even ere nightfall they were to be undeceived.

The woman with the two children waited until the procession had passed, and then returned, as she had promised, to the fountain.

"Come with me," she said, bending kind eyes on the weary figure still seated there. "I shall not tarry for the procession to return. You shall have the rest and refreshment you need at my house, which is not far away."

At these words the other raised a face flushed with gratitude and, her hood slightly falling back, the speaker gave a sudden start of recognition.

"Why surely," she said, "you are the daughter of della Bella, who left Florence with him eight years ago."

"Yes," the other replied, with a smile, "I am Leonora, and I have returned, now that my beloved father is dead, to the city where he dwelt and which he loved so passionately to the end, in the hope that even yet I may serve it for his sake. But your face grows familiar too, to me. Surely, you must be Gemma of the Donati family?"

"True, I was Gemma of the Donati," she replied, "though I would fain forget the fact, since I am now, and have been for these eight years past, the wife of one who is now their open enemy. Maybe you remember my husband, Dante of the Alighieri?"

"I remember him well," cried Leonora, warmly.

"My 'ather had the highest regard for him, and prophesied great things of his future ; I have been told, too, that these have been fulfilled and that he has risen to the office of Prior."

"'Tis true," said Gemma, proudly. "He is known as the Prior whose strict impartiality in banishing the leaders of both sides from Florence was much applauded by many, though some blame him for allowing his friend, Guido Cavalcanti, to return before the others. But look you, Donna Leonora, Guido was stricken with fever caught in his exile, and that were surely sufficient reason for his recall. My husband loved him dearly, and it wrung his heart to the core to exile him at all. Could he have let him die away from Florence, I ask you ? Guido died soon after his return as it was, and deeply did Dante mourn him. But look you, I will whisper to you, I think this same Guido was a bit of a fool ; for when Dante became Prior, and the first of them all, forsooth, this Guido must needs say, ' This is a great honour for thee, no doubt, Dante, but to have written one song in your Vita Nuova, were, to my mind, a greater thing any day than to be a prior.' Didst ever hear the like ? Why, the Vita Nuova is but a book of silly verse, which hardly any one can understand, while to be a Prior of Florence!—well, everybody knows what that means ! But I shall tire you with my chatterings, and here we are at the house."

They had turned into a narrow street, one side of which was blocked with the gloomy front of the Badia church, whilst almost opposite was the plain, narrow house with the small, high windows, which was the home of Dante.

Gemma opened the little shutter in the front door, and called through it to a servant, who hastened to admit them.

"This way, dear lady," said Gemma, leading Leonora into a room on the left, where a younger child than the boys ran to greet them.

"Here is my little Bice, named after some great lady to whom Dante wrote his poems," she said, drawing the fair-haired child to her.

"You see," she added by way of explanation as she sent the children away, "there are several kinds of love, as Dante hath explained to me. There is an ideal love which only seeks to worship from afar, and which, to my thinking, is mostly poetry and moonshine, and Dante himself says that for a man to wed his ideal is rare and might not be happiness. Then there is the love for a wife who can be a helpmeet to a man, who bares him his children and cares for his home and seeks not to share all the lofty thoughts which no woman can expect to understand. This is the love that Dante gives me. It may not be for eternity, but to my way of thinking, it is good enough for earth. But you, Donna Leonora, have you never wed? I wonder if you have not, for in truth you are not bad looking, and for a woman to be unwed, and yet not in a convent, is surely most strange."

"Perhaps so," said Leonora, "but I have no vocation for the life of the Cloister, and the man I loved and who loved me is dead."

"Dear, dear!" said Gemma, her kind eyes full of compassion. "But," she added with sudden cheerfulness, "do not despond, dear lady. There is more than one man in the world, and surely a husband can be

found for you, even though no doubt, your dowry will be small and your father's name is not loved over much in Florence now."

"Nay, nay," said Leonora, "you mistake me. I desire no husband. The love I have known was the ideal one of which your Dante dreams, and yet it was also of this world. The man I loved was my soul's mate as well as the hero of my girlhood's dream, and having once loved Filippo Donati, I could never love another."

While Gemma talked, the servant, in obedience to her orders, had been preparing a simple repast, which was now placed before her guest, but in the act of inviting her to partake, Gemma came to a sudden standstill. On her kind, somewhat homely features, various feelings were struggling for mastery, and as though to give herself time, she murmured :

"Filippo Donati did you say ?"

"He was the son of Corso," continued Leonora, "but not with him in spirit. He sympathised with my father and with your husband, and with all who care for the true welfare of others instead of their own advancement. Alas ! I heard but a year ago that he was cruelly done to death on a journey to Rome, undertaken by order of the Podestà at the time of our own exile. With him perished one of the noblest souls that Florence hath ever held——"

"Stay !" cried Gemma. Her face was aglow, for during Leonora's words, she had hastily made up her mind what to do. "Drink this," she said, hurriedly pouring out some wine and pressing it and some fine wheaten bread into Leonora's hand. "Refresh thyself, and then I have tidings to give thee."

Leonora, worn out in body and mind, obeyed. It did not seem that the news which Gemma had for her could be of any great importance. Could any news ever be so to her again, now that the two who had made all her world were both death? But when the meal urged on her by the prudent Gemma had been consumed, she turned to her with mild enquiry.

"'Tis great news I have for you," said Gemma. "Listen, Filippo Donati lives!"

The colour rushed in one warm wave over Leonora's face, dyeing brow and cheek a roseate hue.

"He lives!" she cried, in a voice vibrating with emotion. But rapidly the colour faded from her cheeks and a deadly pallor followed it. For a year she had thought of Filippo as dead, and as removed, therefore, from all the strife into which he had seemed destined to take his part, and now the old pain of their separation, the old sense of the barrier placed between them by life, clutched at her soul, which had felt nearer to him in death.

"'Tis not true, it cannot be true," she murmured. "We were told by one of the Pazzi, who had just come from Florence, how that Filippo was cruelly done to death and that his retainers returned with the story of his murder."

"'Twas true they left him for dead with three armed assassins around him," said Gemma. "But the approach of a band of friars put them to flight ere the evil deed was fully accomplished. They left him no doubt for dead, but the friars, finding some faint trace of life in him, bore him to their monastery, where, after much careful nursing, he recovered. But," she added, cautiously,

" 'tis a profound secret. So much so that, though Dante told me this much, he would not tell me under what name Filippo now passes. I only know that, disguised as a friar, he does much good for the state and endeavours to check the evil designs and schemes of his father, my cousin Corso, and of his wife Lucia who, between you and me, I think knows a little more than most people about the attempt on Filippo's life. But for to-day we must talk no more. You shall bide here with me for the present. Dante, as I told you, is away. He hath gone on some secret state errand to Rome, but if, in truth, the era of peace be restored, I shall no doubt soon have him back in safety, for he loves not to be long absent from Florence, nor indeed from me and the children, only, of course, public affairs must ever come first with a man."

Leonora felt too much worn out by all the fatigues and emotions of the day to desire to discuss anything further. She gratefully accepted Gemma's kindly offered hospitality, and retired to rest for a night which, outside the quiet home, was full of significant events for Florence.

CHAPTER XXXII

CORSO'S REVENGE ON FLORENCE

EVEN so soon as within an hour of Gemma and Leonora leaving the Piazza, the over confident Florentines began to see signs of their trust in Charles of Valois being misplaced. When the procession started on its return journey from the church, where he had taken the oath of his peaceful intentions to the Florentines, it was noticed with dismay that fully armed followers suddenly appeared to swell his train, and even more ominous, the well-known faces of some of the banished Blacks were also seen to mingle here and there with the crowd. But with the same bland smile, the same smiling assurance that he had come on a mission of peace, the traitor pursued his way.

The alarmed citizens, however, returned from their holiday-making to the task of barricading their houses and preparing for defence.

The Priors, with the exception of Dino Compagni, were at this time a weak and irresolute body to whom a decided course of action seemed impossible, and who sorely needed some strong and resolute leader such as Dante to force them to action. To the Council Chamber where they were assembled, agitated citizens now

flocked, bringing a succession of alarming reports, and in the general confusion the Priors seemed to lose their heads, and allowed themselves to be swayed first by one adviser and then by another. But all foresaw that the city was in grave peril, and that in inviting Charles to their midst they had verily placed their heads between the jaws of the lion.

Towards nightfall, a monk appeared begging for a secret interview, and suggested to the distracted rulers that a religious procession was the only course to preserve the safety of the city, only making it a stipulation that the procession should not cross the Arno as the French prince did not wish to be disturbed. In spite of the advice of Dino Compagni, who pointed out that it was a time more for fighting than for prayer, the foolish Priors gave in to the suggestion of the monk and by ordering the procession to take place immediately played, as was intended, into the hands of the enemy who by this means sought to waste the time that should have been spent in preparing for defence.

No sooner was the order given than they began to repent, but it was too late.

A friar next pushed his way through the waiting crowds and thrust himself before them.

"Sirs, sirs," he cried, "I beseech you, give orders for the city to be defended forthwith. I do assure you that this is the time not for speeches nor processions, but for the sharpening of swords and the barricading of houses. The fate of Florence trembles in the balance. Thank you that it is Charles of Valois alone whom we have to fear? I tell you we have worse enemies to contend with than even the French traitor. The

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banished Blacks are returning. Can we doubt that Corso himself is far away? Let them once gain possession of the town, and who can answer for the bloodshed and destruction that will ensue? I entreat you to send an armed force to each gate of Florence, and at the same time warn every citizen that treachery will be punished with instant death. By prompt measures alone may we yet be saved."

"What is the madman?" said one of the Priors, a young man of the name of Carracci.

"No madman," replied Dino in a low voice, "but one known as Brother Sebastian, who was much trusted by Dante in affairs of state. I should pay attention to his words."

In consequence of this advice, the next day a block and axe appeared in the great public square, as a reminder of the punishment reserved for the disobedient, and an appeal at the same time was issued for the citizens to come armed to the Bargello square. But throughout the day the disturbed state of the city, the frequent riots, the general sense of restless dissatisfaction, proclaimed that the poison of a revolutionary spirit was secretly working. As the hours sped the sense of impending events seemed to hang over the city as an ominous cloud, and when, in response to the appeal of the Priors, the next morning brought no answering citizens to the Bargello, it was plain to see that the plot was deep-seated and widespread. All through that day the great flag or standard of Florence fluttered from the palace against the autumn breeze; but in vain did it wave its mute appeal. As the day wore on, the condition of things grew more critical with every minute.

Through these hours of terrible suspense, when Florence seemed, as it were, waiting paralysed and inert for the gathering storm to break, Brother Sebastian was indefatigable. It would seem as if he must be at two sides of the city at once, so rapid were his movements, and it was from him that the government learnt two of the most important pieces of news during the day. The first of these was that a band of workmen, under the government banner, who had been sent, too tardily, to repair one of the principal gates of the city, had been attacked by a party of Blacks aided by soldiers, who had wounded some and put the others to flight.

Towards nightfall he brought news of an even more alarming character. He had himself seen a man disguised as a pedlar, whom he recognised as a former retainer of Corso's, going the round of the Blacks, and, under pretence of selling drugs, conveying a secret message to them. Sebastian had succeeded by a ruse in obtaining one of these missives, and discovered that it was a warning to all the Blacks to be prepared for a great blow on the morrow.

But even as he revealed this to the government, Sebastian himself was aware that it was too late. The terrified Priors were no longer capable of decision, and, even had they been, the city was too entirely demoralised for any corporate action to be possible. Treachery, like an evil disease, had spread through it, and even the officials attached to the government were false.

All that night the anxious citizens waited for the impending doom, which it was impossible to doubt hung over the unfortunate city. And early the next

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morning the blow fell, and like wildfire there spread the news that the Baron of Ill-fame, with a large armed force, was at the gates. Corso had not plotted with Charles of Valois without avail, and the hour of his triumph and revenge drew nigh.

Through the gates which had closed behind him as a disgraced exile, now rode the great Black leader, seated on a magnificent charger and wearing an expression of greater hatred and more triumphant pride than even that haughty, disdainful countenance had ever worn before. Florence should suffer, on that he was resolved, and to the heart burning beneath its political wrongs, private wrath lent a yet fiercer glow, driving him on like a thousand clamouring devils. The discovery of Lucia's act of treachery in seeking the protection of her father's house, had filled his passion for her with a bitterness as of Hell, and he vowed that after his mastery of the city should follow the mastery and subduing of the woman who was his torment and his delight. She should learn by his very deeds this day that the man to whom she had given herself was one not to be trifled with, and later he would bend her pride until she knelt prostrate before him, even as Florence should kneel, and never dare to disobey him again. Hitherto, in the clash of their personalities he had been the one always to give in. She had been his conqueror all the time. This should be so no more. He would bend and break her to his will, and the beauty which had ruled him should lie passive and humiliated in his arms. She had incited him to crimes for which his soul might yet have to burn in Hell flames. He would have his heaven out of her here. All the primitive and

elemental forces of human nature and of sex seemed to have obtained a mystery over this man, who was at one time capable of much that was noble. The barriers of civilization seemed to be broken down even as were those of the gates of Florence, and over his soul rushed the invading army of brute passions. On he rode, waving his sword in the air, a fierce, bold expression on his face, which sent a tremor through the limbs of the citizens who beheld him.

And before that sight of conscious victory and strength, the fickle populace gave way, as he had reckoned they would, and the cries of "Long live the Baron! Hail! Messer Corso!" soon rang through the air. For the moment it almost seemed as though there might be a peaceful solution of the problem after all. But such was not Corso's design. He saw that to carry out his plans he must first create that anarchy out of which the need for a ruler inevitably arises, and then on the waves of revolution he would be borne himself triumphantly to his goal. He first rode straight to the prisons and released all the inmates, recognising that the best way to plunge a city in the horrors of revolution is to let loose on it all the worst elements, all the dregs of society, since none are so desperate as those who have nothing to lose and all to gain. This done, he rode to the Bargello and ordered the Priors to lay down the government and to return quietly to their houses—an order which the poor perplexed and frightened Priors were very ready to obey.

The way was open now, and the work of vengeance could begin. All that day and night the Blacks, led by Corso, rode broadcast through the city, burning and

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pillaging and slaying without pause or discrimination. The streets ran red with blood, while the sky, crimson from the glow of the burning palaces and shops, seemed to reflect the horrors of the streets below. In place of the huzzas of the morning, the city echoed to the groans of the dying and the shrieks of outraged women. Revolution at its worst was abroad, and all the vilest passions of human nature were let loose over Florence. And, in the midst of the carnage, there was present to the mind of Corso the memory of the woman who had dared to defy him, and the thought of her beauty was like fire in his veins, while ever and again her low voice seemed to whisper in his ear, "I love you best thus, my Corso," even as she had done when he had foretold the fiery deeds which he was now accomplishing. At that memory, the sword of the Black leader struck more surely, and his voice urged his followers on to yet more desperate deeds.

Thus Corso wrought his revenge on the city which had spurned him. And meanwhile, secure in his palace across the Arno, the French traitor feasted, while the city to which he had come with the avowed intention of saving it, was suffering destruction under his eyes.

Of the events on the other side of the river, he professed an ignorance which must have been a little difficult to assume. His dining-hall was illuminated with the glow from the burning city, and as he poured himself out more wine or helped himself to some dainty dish, he would ask his courtiers with slightly raised brows, "Pray tell me what great light is this? Do the Florentines make holiday to welcome our presence?"

With the etiquette which knew that the prince's mood

was to be indulged, the French courtiers would make reply :

"That, Sire, must be the reflection from some poor cottage on fire. Thatch burns rapidly and makes much blaze, as we all know."

"True," said Charles, "but I fancied it was an illumination."

More difficult was this game of dissimulation when a distraught citizen, whose house was on fire, and whose wife and daughters had been outraged before his eyes, forced his way into the royal presence as a last desperate hope for help.

"Sire," he gasped, "stay these horrors. My house is on fire ; my property destroyed ; my wife and daughters have been ravished. Bid Messer Corso sheath his sword ere more evil be done."

But in reply, Charles gave a little affected laugh.

"Dear me !" he said, "this good gentleman seems strangely agitated. Indeed, what should I know of his private affairs ? And as for Messer Corso Donati, what can I have to do with him ? Know you not, my friend, that I am sent by the Pope on a mission of peace alone, and cannot interfere in private quarrels ?"

A woman next threw herself at his feet.

"Mercy, mercy," she cried ; "my husband is slain and my home is in flames. I know not the fate of my innocent babes. Save me !"

"Give her shelter," said Charles, turning blandly to one of his gentlemen. "She appears to have some beauty. Monsieur de Charlois," he added meaningly, "I will entrust her protection to you."

And the woman was dragged shrieking away.

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But when at last even Corso's lust for slaughter was satiated, and the city sank down into comparative peace, Charles bestirred himself before he bid farewell to the town which he had plunged in all the horrors of a revolution. Under his guidance a new government of the Blacks was reconstructed, and Corso Donati placed at its head.

The opportunity longed and waited for so eagerly by himself and Lucia seemed within sight at last.

CHAPTER XXXIII

GATHERING CLOUDS

IN the general misery caused by the revolution, the little home near the church of Badia, where Leonora had found shelter, did not escape. One of the first acts of the new government was to pronounce sentence of banishment against its master, still absent from Florence on his foreign mission, and in due order his property was confiscated and his house seized. In this state of destitution the only available shelter for poor Gemma with her helpless babes was in the very house to which, as that of her husband's enemy, she had been most reluctant to go, but her relation to the Donati family gave her a right to their protection which she felt it impossible to refuse. "Blood is after all thicker than water," she remarked, as with streaming eyes she packed up the few remaining household goods and prepared to depart from the home of her married life.

"Besides," she said to Leonora, "Dante is sure to return to us soon. They could never banish such a man for long. They will be clamouring for him back again before you have time to wink. You will see!" and she nodded sagaciously. Leonora, remembering another exile who was never recalled, found it difficult to answer, though neither women knew then of the base charge of corruption in the affairs of state which was to be

brought against the man who had sought so earnestly to serve it.

Leonora had also, for the moment, no choice but to accept the shelter of the Donati Palace. It was indeed no time for any women to be without protection in Florence; for brute forces, when once aroused, do not slumber all at once, and though the government now kept the city in outward order, the smouldering passions of the mob were liable to break loose at any moment. Moreover, Leonora could not find it in her heart to forsake the friend who had treated her with so much kindness in her desolation, now that she herself was overwhelmed with sorrow, for Gemma clung to Leonora in her grief, as the weaker nature will do to one stronger than itself, and the mere thought of parting from her filled her with dread.

"Stay with me at least until my Dante return," she had entreated with sobs, when Leonora once suggested seeking another shelter, little imagining that the looked-for day of that return was never destined to take place.

The little Bice also was ailing, and clung to Leonora, whose gentle touch seemed best to soothe the restless fever of the little sufferer. Always delicate, the mother feared that Bice, like her immortalised namesake, was destined for an early grave, especially as the child had already shown strong spiritual yearnings which later led to her embracing the Convent life.

As the two women bent over the little sufferer, soothing her with the tender ministrations which come as a natural instinct to all good women, they little foresaw the day when at the distant court of Ravenna the child herself, grown a woman, was to perform a like office

for the father, whose return they now so eagerly expected.

So to the Donati Palace, fraught for Leonora also with so many poignant associations, she went with her friend, and there they settled in a quiet suite of apartments, out of sound of the gay revelries with which the other part of the mansion echoed.

Lucia had joined her husband as soon as order was restored, and for a brief interval it would seem that the lofty ambition of the two was likely at last to approach fulfilment, as they feasted and revelled while Florence lay at their feet.

Success added a fresh brilliance to Lucia's beauty, which now, in her maturity, was not less dazzling than in youth, and bewitched once more by her, Corso rejoiced in that consummate loveliness without thought of the past. Indeed, Lucia, having braved the fierce storm of her husband's wrath when he had visited Lucca during his exile, and intrepid though she was, having quailed beneath his pitiless scorn and anger, had joined him in a humble and chastened mood, which she guessed would be the best means to propitiate him and regain his favour. And Corso, weary of battle, and sickened in spite of himself by the horrors he had created, found in this new Lucia the very woman he had sought, ready for him. He had no need, after all, to summon all the forces of his nature to cross hers, since she proved so gentle and yielding. He had conquered, so he told himself, without a battle, and as she submitted herself to him in an apparent passion of self-abandonment, he gloried in having won so easily, and fondly imagined that the proud spirit which had seemed at one time to rule him, was bent and submissive to his will at last.

But it is often at the moment of the greatest apparent victory that the hour of defeat is in reality nearest, and we are seldom so weak as when we make boast of our strength ; and so it was to prove with Corso.

For a brief time all was triumph and brilliant display in the Donati Palace. Night after night the walls echoed to the gay sounds of revelry, and the dazzling heights of still greater power seemed to beckon its master and mistress from within measurable distance. If their lavish expenditure threatened to overtax their resources, they both put the idea from them, or admitted it only to console themselves or each other with the prospect of those greater riches which the still higher position they craved would afford them. Meanwhile, the splendour and display surrounding them were worthy of a court, and became the common talk of Florence, though even those who condemned this extravagance did not, in many instances, refuse to avail themselves of the costly foods and wines, the elaborate entertainments, with which Corso and Lucia provided their guests.

If Corso, in moments of depression, ever suggested retrenchment, Lucia urged him against any such course, pointing out that success creates success, and that by showing how they would rule if a court were indeed theirs, they would best prepare the way for having one.

As, decked in resplendent finery, and covered with jewels, she presided at the banqueting-board, there never lurk behind that unruffled brow, those smiling, scarlet lips, those lustrous eyes, the thought of the crimes by which she had attained the position she occupied ? Did the pale face of Agnese in its death agony never rise before her as her white hand raised the cup of costly

wine to her lips ? Or did she never think of the noble, earnest face of the young heir of the house, who would have graced the board, lying, far away from his home, with the death dews upon it as his life blood oozed from his wounds ? If it were so, she gave no sign.

But to Corso, in whose nature all the nobler instincts were not entirely deadened, even by the course of crime to which he had surrendered himself, there would come moments, even now, when almost unendurable remorse seized him, when he sickened at the sight of his wife's beauty and shrank from that base side of himself to which she had ever appealed. These moods, however, he carefully concealed, and an extra outburst of boisterous mirth was the sole indication that they existed. So, for a time, all was feasting and outward rejoicing with the pair, but it was not long before murmurs of approaching dissatisfaction began to be heard, and soon the seething waters of political strife, on which Corso had thought to ride in triumph to the topmost pinnacle of power, threatened instead to engulf him in their angry depths.

Plots and counterplots were once more the order of the day, and angry members of the White party, under Vieri dei Cerchi, did not fail to harass their enemies the Blacks, both within and without the city walls.

Ominous murmurs began to be heard at the same time against the Lord of the Donati Palace, who, for a time, had enjoyed that worthless popularity which success can always demand.

Corso's moods of fierce boisterousness grew more frequent, and in private his brow was often dark and gloomy, while beneath her gay manner even Lucia began

secretly to tremble. She made no outward sign, and if ever the position was spoken of between her and her husband, she immediately bade him be of good cheer, declaring that such a thing as his downfall was an impossibility. But in her base heart, meanwhile, she was hatching a desperate plot by which she strove to prevent that downfall in which she professed to disbelieve, and more than that, by a depth of treachery at which she did not dare to hint to Corso, to secure the prize which unaided, might even now be snatched from her grasp. She knew that to disclose this project would be fatal to it then, but when once it was accomplished, she would dare to face even her husband's wrath once more, or, as seemed to her more likely, she would not need to face it, since he would accord her a ready forgiveness when once he saw the accomplishment of her schemes. The time, however, had not yet come ; the time had only come to watch and prepare, and play a part which should deceive her husband, as well as the whole of the rest of Florence. But in her heart surged wild ambitions of which even Corso never dreamt, any more than he guessed the full depths of duplicity of which she was capable.

But now, in the midst of Corso's public anxieties, a domestic sorrow befell him which was in one sense an outcome of them, and which, by hitting him in his most sensitive spot, seemed like a presage of all future ill.

Mention has not so far been made of Simone Donati since the day when his father prepared for his exile, but this cherished son of Corso's, had, since his return, taken an eager part in all the life of the Palace. In the outside life of Florence he had also taken some part, and in all his actions confirmed the opinion that

he was gifted with abilities of a very high order. Added to this, his handsome appearance and winning manners had always made him a favourite, and combined with his talents to mark him out as one likely to rise to the front. Into the hot blood of this young man the poison of hate between his father's and mother's families had been instilled at the most impressionable age, and he now vowed deadly vengeance against these disturbers of his father's peace.

On the Christmas-day of the year that Corso returned to Florence, Simone sallied forth to the Piazza of Santa Croce, where a popular preacher was holding forth to a considerable crowd. Simone, who had not gone forth with the intention of spending his time in listening to a sermon, and who, it is to be feared, paid little attention to the message of peace suitable to the day, was on the look out for adventure, and seeing his Uncle Niccolò dei Cerchi, brother of Vieri, pass that way on horseback, accompanied by a few retainers, he determined to follow him. Niccolò was bent on a peaceful enough errand, that simply of inspecting some farms and mills which lay outside the city walls, and was considerably astonished when, at the Bridge called Affrico, his nephew overtook him and bade him halt.

"What wouldst thou, nephew?" he said, turning a surprised countenance on the young man's flushed and heated face. "This is not the fitting occasion for a quarrel."

"No time is the fitting occasion for a quarrel for cowards who work in the dark against those of their own kin, as your house hath long done against mine," cried Simone. "For my part, I say that all times are

the fitting ones for the settling of such enmity once and for all by the sword. Defend thyself!" And, carried away by a blind access of rage and the wanton desire for a fight, the young man drew his own weapon.

Niccolò could do no less than draw his, if only in self-defence, though indeed his own blood was now well up also.

"Take this then for thy vaunted boldness, and down with you," he cried, with a thrust at Simone. But the younger man wheeled his horse aside in time to escape the blow, and the next moment he made such a furious attack on his uncle, that, to his own dismay, Niccolò reeled in his saddle while the blood gushed from his side.

"In truth, I meant not to slay thee," said Simone, leaving near to him in consternation now that he saw how serious the results of his rash, uncalled-for quarrel were likely to be. But as he did so, rage gave the dying Corso his strength for a supreme effort and, holding to his saddle bow with one hand, he reached out with the other and gave Simone a deep sword thrust in return.

"Take that, thou son of a devil, and go to Hell with it," he said; then, with a groan, fell lifeless from his horse.

Simone himself was so severely wounded that it was necessary to fetch a litter and to bear him in this back to his father's house.

Corso was at meat with Lucia when the bleeding form of this, his well-loved son, was borne in, and overcome with anguish at the sight of his condition, he vowed awful vows of vengeance against the family of the man who had wounded him. An apothecary was summoned

in all haste while the women of the household, with such arts as they possessed, endeavoured to staunch and dress the wound. Simone meanwhile sank into unconsciousness, but at nightfall turned his eyes, with the light of full consciousness, on his father.

"Blame not my uncle, who is himself dead, for this misfortune," he murmured. "'Twas I alone who provoked the quarrel."

"Thou shalt live to revenge it thyself," cried the distracted father, bending over him. "Simone, Simone, leave me not! Whom else have I but thee?"

"Nay, nay, I shall be dead ere another sunrise," said the young man, in a weak voice. "Never mind, father. I have had my day, though a brief one. What matter if life be long or short? We all must needs come to the same goal in the end. Let some masses be said for my soul at Santa Croce, and do not grieve over-much for me. Perchance it is best for me to move out of the way and join Filippo."

"You torture me by your words," said Corso. "Since Filippo be dead, the greater need have I of thee. What have I left, if you too are taken?"

"Thy wife—and Florence!" replied the young man, faintly, and with a gasp breathed his last.

Was there a suggestion of scorn, a slight touch of bitter satire, in those dying words? Corso never knew.

A great change came over the Baron of Ill-fame after the death of this, his brilliantly gifted son. He still strove for the power, to obtain which had been the dream and object of his life, but it seemed as though the heart had gone from his efforts and that he strove more as one

who cannot relinquish the habit of a lifetime, than as one whose incentive is fresh and strong.

It was indeed said by some that he never raised his head again after this tragic death of his one remaining child, on whom so many hopes had centred. It is true, at any rate, that to the ambitious schemes which he still planned, he was urged no longer by personal ambition. Two motives actuated him—one the ambition of his wife, which still urged on his own flagging zeal ; the other less the wish to succeed than the desire not to fail. Though all the fruits of success might be turned to dust and ashes in his mouth, his pride still made him shrink from the alternative of failure ; and his flagging ambition was still goaded on by the fear that if he ceased to exert himself he might become a mere cypher in the state over which he had sought to reign as despot, or, worse still, the object of hatred and scorn, and be driven forth once more as an exile.

As time went on, however, it was impossible for even the most self-deceived not to be aware that Corso's position in the state rested on a very insecure foundation, and that the tide of popular feeling had turned against him. The party to which he had formerly belonged was now split up into two factions, and in identifying his lot with the section consisting of a mixture of nobles with a large number of the superior popolani, Corso thought to strengthen his position. This was not, however, the result, for the more powerful nobles, actuated by jealousy, being on the side against him, pointed out to the citizens the growing danger of Corso's seizing the lordship of the whole city. Thus the government was careful to exclude him, as far as possible,

from any honours they had it in their power to bestow, and these constant slights chafed and irritated Corso's sore spirit. His self-indulgence in the delights of the table, and the quantities of wine he took in order to deaden his feelings, made him also the prey of frequent attacks of gout, and this, added to his mental disquiet, produced a still more irritable and overbearing demeanour, which all tended to bring him into disfavour and to hasten his downfall.

And while he and Lucia feasted and the palace was brilliant with every display of splendour that money could procure, the sounds of mirth rang often hollow in the air, and overhead the dark clouds slowly gathered shape.

And Lucia, ever watchful, saw that her great stroke must be struck soon, if it was to be in time.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE STORM BREAKS

EARLY one morning, Corso entered his wife's apartment moved by an agitation which it was impossible to conceal.

" Lucia," he said in a hoarse whisper, as he bent over her, " prepare for evil news. I am accused of a terrible deed. True, I am innocent of it, but whether Florence will accept proof of my innocence or not, I do not know. It may be but a vile plot to entrap me and cause my ruin, and if so, Florence will refuse to heed that which she does not wish to know."

Lucia, whose whole frame was tense and alert, moistened her dry lips as she replied :

" Who is it that accuses you, Corso ? Let me know the worst."

" 'Tis the people of Florence themselves who have lodged the accusation against me in the hands of the Podestà, Messer Piero della Branca," he said.

" Tell me more, I entreat," she said, raising frightened eyes to him. " Hide nothing from me, Corso. What is the nature of the indictment ? "

" Treason," he made answer, " against the government, and not only against the government, but against the whole people of Florence. This time it is not a mere matter of an appeal to the Pope for a foreign prince to be sent to our aid as mediator, for which, as you know,

I suffered banishment before. Even that in the eyes of Florence were a small thing in comparison with this. How to tell thee, of all people, I know not, but would to Heaven that thou hadst never gone to Lucca! Perchance that very act of thine will lend colour to this accusation."

Lucia grew deadly pale as he spoke, for in her heart she knew that the supreme moment of her life for good or ill had come. With a great effort she controlled herself. At all costs she must retain the power of her sex and beauty over this man, whom she had tricked and betrayed. Was there enough of her old influence left to subjugate him as it had so often done before? Would his outraged honour, his humbled pride, be proof against the passion she could once invoke in him? Who could say? Something in the expression of her husband's face made her feel less certain of herself than usual, but she thrust the suggestion of failure from her. She knew that she now would need every force that she could summon to her aid.

"How can I give you any sympathy, any advice, Corso," she said, "when as yet I know not of what you are accused? Speak, I entreat thee; this suspense is unendurable."

A glance at her face, rigid and white, with burning eyes and tightly compressed lips, seemed to Corso to confirm these words, and moved a chord of tenderness and pity in him towards this woman who, with all her faults and evil deeds, had shared his chequered fortunes for so long.

"Be prepared for a shock," he said, taking her burning hand in his own; "the matter touches you very nearly

in more ways than one. 'Tis of no less than of plotting with your father, Uguccione, that I am held guilty. 'Tis actually said that I have invited him to enter Florence, and that I will in that case make over the lordship to him, but, as I need scarcely tell you, I am innocent. How the vile slander has arisen, I cannot say. Perhaps some enemy has invented it all. But there is in my mind a worse dread than that."

"What is your dread?" she asked breathlessly, fixing her eyes on him in an agony of suspense. Yet at the same time she held his hand with a soft, caressing pressure. She did not forget, at this moment of terror and uncertainty, as to what the next words of Corso might mean to her, that every art and every wile she knew how to employ might soon be needed by her. Did he guess, did he even dimly suspect? These were the questions which hung on his next words.

"It is this," said Corso, in reply to that breathless question. "My fear is that there is actual truth in the accusation, and that though I am guiltless myself, some other's evil deed has been put down to me. I fear lest in truth there may be something in this and that Uguccione, with an armed force, may indeed be on his way to Florence."

There was a breathless pause, but one more question must yet be asked and answered.

"Who do you think may have done this?" she said. To her own ears it seemed as though the words hardly formed themselves on her parched lips, and that the seconds before her husband's answer came were hours.

"You ask more than I can answer," he said, simply. "I have not the least idea."

For a moment Lucia's brain seemed to whirl in a sense of overwhelming relief and delight. She would win after all, and her husband might never know ! As Uguccione's daughter and Corso's wife, she could enjoy a double power in the day when Uguccione should rule with Corso at his right hand. In time he would succeed Uguccione as Lord of Lucca, and Florence might form but a part of the Lucchese territory, while Corso himself need never know at what price this gain for him was purchased. Uguccione, if he ever knew, would keep the secret, and the mystery of the message which she had sent, forged in her husband's name, might never be divulged. Even if it were, Corso would forgive her when he was tasting the delights of wealth and power which she would have won for him. The only thing remaining to accomplish was to delay Corso's trial until her father and his troops entered Florence. Her messenger had been gone some time, and the very fact of the plot having reached Florentine ears proved that matters were advancing. That very night he might be at the gates, when the government could be rapidly overturned, and Corso would be free, and triumphant happiness would follow. She would lie in his arms exultant, and while he pressed her to his heart, little should he guess the part she had played. Swiftly these thoughts chased each other through her brain and, almost without pause, she gave a low laugh which she could not restrain.

"Corso, Corso !" she cried, throwing herself into his arms, "you will be released. They will never sentence you, I am sure."

"You take it wondrously lightly," said Corso, gazing

at her in surprise. "Even if I be released, I can assure you that this will not improve my position with the Florentines, and more than that, it is at all events a sign of my waning power and popularity."

"My lord," she murmured, clinging to him, "what matter popularity and power when I love you?"

In her heart she was nevertheless revelling in the increase of power which she hoped to have secured for him and herself by her treacherous act, and at the same time her brain was rapidly considering the surest course by which his trial could be delayed until Uguccione arrived.

But to Corso, who could not see into that heart, her words seemed a proof of her love and of her trust such as she had seldom given him.

"Befall what may, no man could be entirely desolate while he possessed your love, my Lucia," he said. "It is something that thou wilt believe in my innocence even should Florence condemn me."

As he spoke, his love for her touched a deeper chord in him than it had ever done before. Perhaps it was but retribution that it should be so at the very moment when she was falsest to him.

For even now she did not shrink from him. Even now, when she had risked his life itself for her own base and selfish ends, she could still return his caresses and cajole him with her arts.

"Of course I believe in your innocence, Corso," she said. "What can the opinion of Florence one way or the other matter to me? Am I not your wife who will love you whatever happens? But as yet you have not told me when you are summoned to appear before the magistrates. When is it to be?"

"This very day," he answered gloomily. "Though, for that matter, perhaps the sooner the better. If they do not acquit me to-day, they would not be more likely to do so to-morrow or the day after."

"Corso," she whispered, leaning against him, "do me this one favour. 'Tis long since I asked aught of thee, but this I do ask. Go not before the magistrates. For to-day at least, leave their vile accusations unanswered."

"You do not know what you ask," he said, in astonishment. "It were the maddest folly not to appear and answer this accusation in person."

"Oh Corso," she said sadly, "I thought you would have granted me this one favour. Have I forfeited your good will; are you, after all, no longer my loving husband as of old? There was a time, alas! now gone by, when Lucia's lightest whim was law; and yet I love you, with all my heart and soul I love you yet!"

And she fell to soft weeping.

"Hush, hush, Lucia," said Corso, "you know that I love you as of yore, but you would not surely wish me to grant what would be for my own undoing."

"Oh, Corso, it would not be," she cried, clinging to him. "Cannot you trust me when I tell you that if you wait but one day ere you appear, I will furnish evidence that will go far to acquit you? Have you forgotten how I saved you before, when you were accused of murdering Galastrone's servant? Cannot you leave it to my woman's wit and to my loving heart to save thee once again? I only ask for a day or perhaps two," she pleaded. "Grant me this, Corso, my lord, and you will live to prove that delay in this instance is not folly but the truest wisdom."

"Failure to appear may be counted the same whether it be for one day or for many," he answered gloomily; but even as he spoke he felt himself yielding to Lucia's wishes. Her appeal to his affection exercised on him its witchery as of old, and in addition to this her own conviction in the wisdom of delay was not without its effect. Mingled with these emotions stirred also his impatience of cold-blooded methods. To answer his accusers in the calm atmosphere of a court and with the verbal methods employed there, were after all less in keeping with all the instincts of his nature than to meet them with the battle-axe and the sword. Was not bloodshed the argument which had always most recommended itself to him with his enemies?

"You will stay, I know you will," Lucia cried joyfully, as she noticed the signs of relenting beneath the gloom of his countenance. "Oh, Corso, how happy you make me, for I know by this token that you do indeed love me still; and you will be repaid, I know. You will find your trust in me justified. You will live yet to be a prince in all but name, perhaps, who knows? even one in reality."

"This is not the time for dreams of the future," he answered. "Heaven knows that, at the best, all our powers will be needed for the present. I am innocent of this charge, and therefore my acquittal may take place, but whether I appear in answer to this summons or not, it is well that the palace should be defended. I will go forth now to gather all my people and kinsmen within its precincts and to give orders that every approach be barricaded."

"That is well," said Lucia eagerly. "That is the

spirit I have always loved best in you, Corso. Wherefore should you go and put your own head in the noose? Let them come for you, if they want you, and when they come, give them such a reception as will make them hesitate how they lodge accusations against you in future. Hasten Corso, for if the trial be fixed for to-day there is indeed no time to be wasted."

When Corso had left her, Lucia rose rapidly and hurried through some of the long, winding passages of the palace to the apartments placed at the disposal of the refugees from Dante's house, who still dwelt in that shelter, waiting for the still hoped-for, though long-delayed, day of his recall. It was not often that the mistress of the Donati Palace favoured the humble member of her husband's family with an interview, and, in fact, the little circle lived almost as separate an existence as they might have lived had they been in a home of their own. But Lucia had a definite object in visiting Gemma this morning, which was one of such direful import for the inhabitants of the Palace. If, as she knew was possible, the Florentines should attack the palace, there might be a fierce battle ere nightfall, whether Ugucione arrived on the scene that day or not, and it were best in that case for the non-combatant members of the household to be lodged near together, so that in protecting them the defendants should not scatter their forces. All this she did not choose to disclose to the women, who were much surprised at receiving this early call from her, and still more so when she gave them a gracious invitation to visit her in her apartments. But on finding her invitation being politely, but firmly refused, Lucia found it necessary to give some explanation.

"Donna Gemma," she said, "I know not why my friendly overtures should not be received by you in the same spirit. You and your children and Donna Leonora have been my husband's guests for long, and have received all courtesy and kindness in his house. But since you care not to visit my apartments from motives of friendliness, perhaps you will be persuaded to do so by those of prudence. I had refrained before from telling you of the danger that threatens for fear of alarming you, but that cannot be avoided, I see. Know, then, that danger threatens, and ere nightfall there is a chance of the palace being attacked. Under these circumstances, you and your children would, of course, be in greater safety near to me than you would be hidden away here, and it is for this reason that I urge you to accompany me."

"The palace to be attacked," cried Gemma, her eyes wide with alarm. "Oh, woe is me, that I should have brought my innocent babes to this ill-fated house. Alas! better had it been to follow their father into exile."

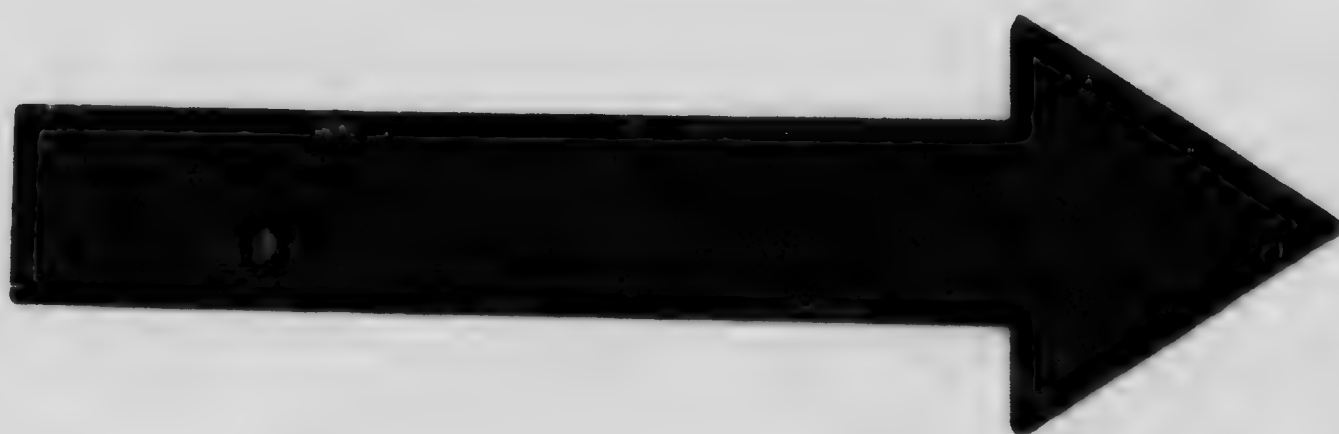
"'Tis no time for vain regrets," said Lucia, coldly, as she rose.

"Will you come with me and be lodged near my own apartments, or do you prefer to remain here in danger?"

"It were best to accompany the lady," said Leonora, gently.

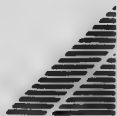
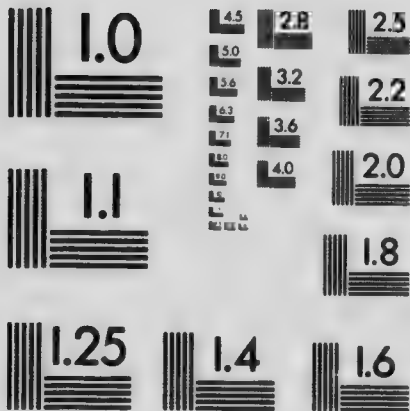
"For the sake of the little ones it were not well to run any risk that can be avoided. Come, dear Gemma, let us go with Donna Lucia."

"Indeed," said Gemma, wiping her eyes, and feeling somewhat ashamed of her ungraciousness, "Donna



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Lucia is very kind, and I am sure my cousin, Messer Corso, hath treated me with all goodness. I know not why I should hesitate to accept. Forgive me, lady. Since my husband left me I seem no longer the same as of yore."

The children were now summoned, and on hearing that they were to go to the part of the palace which they had always regarded with reverential curiosity, they were wild with excitement and delight.

As they all followed Lucia, Leonora answered their eager questions with the gentle sympathy which had long since won their hearts; but her own heart was heavy, and the weight of impending disaster seemed to hang on her spirit. From the depths of her own clear soul she disliked and thoroughly distrusted Lucia, and though there seemed no course open but to obey her wishes, her own insight warned her that she was actuated by some other motive than mere consideration for the safety of her guests. The ignorance in which she and Gemma were as to the state of matters outside their own walls, and as to the real nature of the attack which Lucia expected, all served to add to her alarm. But with the power which had always been hers to put all thought of self aside, she devoted herself to the amusement of the children and to efforts to comfort and reassure Gemma, who was filled, as she herself was, with anxiety. For aught that they knew those sheltering walls might be a heap of smouldering ruins ere another day dawned.

CHAPTER XXXV

VENGEANCE AT LAST

IN the middle of the day Corso rushed into his wife's presence.

"All is ready," he said, "every approach is strongly barricaded. A body of strong archers stand at the foot of the towers of Cicino and Torcicoda, and another at the narrow way which goes to the Stinche. There are huge barricades at the San Brocolo entrance, and within are assembled my good kinsmen and friends."

His face was aglow, and the lust of battle was strong in him once more. Lucia was right. This was a more worthy way in which to receive his accusation, this was a better answer to the Florentines, than his appearance in court would have been.

"We are only just in time," he went on. "They are on their way to seize me already. A messenger has just come in breathless with the tidings. They waited for an hour, and as I did not appear, sentence of death was pronounced."

"Of death!" cried Lucia, in horror. "Corso, Corso! I never dreamt they would dare do that."

"They come to execute it even now," he continued. "The Priors come first, bearing the standard of justice, and the Podestà himself is with them; the retainers and

standard-bearers in arms, some on foot and others mounted, are also there, while the Captain of the People follows with the public executioner. Aha! let them come. Corso Donati is ready for them!"

"'Twill be the same as after your defiance on the field of Campaldino," cried Lucia. "Do you remember your words then. 'If I conquer, let who will come to demand the penalty of my head.' Florence will forgive your disobedience now, as she did then, Corso. Your courage and brave deeds will so command their admiration that they will hail you once more as their ruler."

But in her heart was ever beating the question—"Will Uguccone be here in time?"

"I now go forth to the fray," he said. "Kiss me, Lucia, ere I leave thee."

She threw herself in his arms and clung to him as he kissed her passionately on her face and neck and brow. Then, as he released her, she bade him wait while she brought him refreshment, and placed a large cup of wine and some bread and meat in his hands. As Corso made his hurried meal, she told him briefly about her guests, and how she had placed them for greater safety in the adjoining apartments.

"Wisely done," said Corso. "Though they are the wife and children of two of my enemies, they are under my protection, and since Gemma is my own cousin's child, I should deplore any ill that might befall her."

But there was no longer time to delay. Loud shouts were heard approaching, and the city bells began to clang out a wild appeal to arms, mingled with which came, faint but unmistakable, the distant clash of steel. With

one more embrace, Corso tore himself from Lucia and hurried forth.

All through the day the battle raged fiercely. To Lucia, straining every nerve to hear, the sounds of the fray came with terrible distinctness. The echoes of heavy blows on the defences of the palace, the clash of steel, the battle cries, the shouts of triumph and the groans of the fallen, reached her, but through all the din and tumult she still listened, but listened in vain for the sound which she longed to hear, the one which would tell her of her father's approach with his Ghibelline forces. At any moment they might be there, and then, attacked from the rear as well as opposed in front, the government troops would have little chance. And when once Uguccione should have forced his way to the Palace, Corso, so she told herself, would have nothing more to fear. The Ghibellines of Florence would almost certainly join forces with their foreign allies, and though Corso had up to then been a Guelph, changes of sides were not unknown, and with Uguccione's powerful support the whole of Florence would immediately be in his hands.

But the slow hours waned and as yet there had been no sign of Uguccione's approach, while to her anxious ears it seemed as though the battle drew nearer to the palace walls, and was fiercer than before.

And now the door was flung open, and Corso himself, with bloodshot eyes and distorted features, stood before her.

"Does he know? Can he have heard?" was her first thought as she rose to meet him.

"Corso, Corso, what hath befallen?" she gasped.

"The day is lost," he said, hoarsely. "On every side they gain. The barricades cannot hold out much longer. In an hour or less, they may be upon us. My one chance now is flight. I must go forth by the gate in the Eastern wall, which perchance they may not discover. All is lost! Farewell, Lucia!"

"Stay, stay," she cried, throwing detaining arms around him.

"All is not lost. Succour comes. You will be saved yet to lord it over Florence."

"What mean you?" he asked, with a swift hope darting through his brain, that in truth she had tidings of good import.

And Lucia, urged by the necessity of the moment, and trusting that at this crisis Corso would forget to blame her for the part she had played, told him the truth.

"Uguccione, my father, approaches with an armed force," she said. "'Tis true that he has been sent for in your name, but it was I who did it to save you. He must surely have started some time since. Think, Corso! at any moment he may be here to save us."

For a moment Corso's brain refused to take in the extent of her perfidy, then slowly the whole truth flashed on him, and he saw her in the full light of her self-revelation.

"Traitor," he hissed. "Then 'twas thou who hath brought me to ruin. 'Tis for thy vile treachery to me and to the state that I am to pay the forfeit! 'Tis to thy evil deed that I owe my fall, base deceiver and liar as thou art!"

"Nay, Corso," she pleaded, "blame me not for what

will prove your salvation. Surely, you can but praise the deed which will save you at last. Without the help of my father and the Ghibellines you would have fallen indeed."

But he flung her from him in passionate wrath and scorn.

"Curse the day when I met you," he cried. "Curse your beauty which has been my undoing! False traitress, I know you at last for what you are. Begone from me for ever, thou devil in guise of a woman!"

"Corso, Corso," she wailed, "spurn me not; I love you."

Even as she spoke the sound of approaching blows, of shouts and trampling feet, echoed nearer and nearer.

Suddenly the door behind them was flung open, and a man in the dress of a friar rushed breathlessly into the room. He kept his head bent, and his face was so closely covered by his hood that little else than a long black beard was visible.

"Hasten, hasten," he panted, turning to Corso. "The barricade towards the Stinche hath fallen. There is no time to lose if you would make good your escape from the wrath of Florence. Flee, while it be possible."

"Heed him not," shrieked Lucia, "'Tis the friar named Sebastian, against whom I warned you long ago. Bide here, and Uguccone will save you yet."

"Uguccone will save no one in Florence," said the friar, turning to her. "I myself met him at the outskirts of the city, and when he heard how the Florentines were already attacking the Donati Palace, he turned back with all his host to Lucca."

"You lie!" screamed Lucia. "He will be here anon. Corso, heed him not, harken to me." She fell at his feet as she spoke, clinging round his knees with her arms, but he flung her from him.

"Liar and traitress!" he cried. "This is doubtless but a trap, by means of which you would see me slain at your feet. This is not the time to harken to thy vile woman's tongue, who hath deceived me too often already. Thou wouldst make me a dupe, and laugh when I was securely caught in thy toils. But I shall escape thee yet."

"Corso, Corso," she wailed. "Before God I swear that what I have done has been with intent to save you."

But he pushed her from him again.

"Sir," he said, turning to Sebastian, "I know not who indeed you are, though there is something strangely familiar to me in your voice and appearance. A chance likeness maybe to one whom I once knew well. But though I know not your motives in thus warning me, I thank you for the courtesy you have shown, and there is, moreover, that about you which inspires me with trust. I now depart to follow your advice."

"Corso, Corso!" shrieked Lucia, once more flinging herself on him; "wouldst thou trust this stranger before thy own wife? Go not forth. It will be certain death. Even if Uguccione come not, art thou not safer, guarded in thy own palace, than out in the open?"

"At least," he said coldly, "I would choose to die in the open rather than to be caught here in a trap," and he strode to the door.

Lucia flung herself in his way, in a frenzy. She still believed that the friar for whom she had an instinctive feeling of enmity, was deceiving them for purposes of his own, and in spite of his assurance to the contrary, she had not entirely abandoned hope of Uguccio's arrival. But with relentless hands Corso pushed her aside. The door closed behind him, and she found herself alone with the friar. For some reason that she could not fathom, an unaccountable dread of this stranger seized her.

"Let me pass," she said haughtily, for he stood now with folded arms barring her way.

For a moment there was no reply; then, with a sudden movement, he let fall his cowl, revealing all his features. Petrified with terror, Lucia gazed upon them.

"Do you not know me?" he asked. "Think, for you have surely seen this face before."

In spite of the changes wrought by time and by the growth of a beard, she did indeed recognise that face.

"Filippo!" she gasped in a hoarse whisper, as soon as he was able to speak. "Art thou his ghost, or is it a fiend has come in this, my evil hour, to torment me in his likeness?"

"'Tis no ghost, nor fiend that you see," was the reply, "but Filippo, your husband's son, indeed. You hoped to have rid yourself for ever from a dangerous enemy, but for once your murderous designs failed. Ah, blame not your hirelings! They thought to have succeeded in the task entrusted to them, and their pay was, doubtless, well-earned, but though they left me for dead, I was restored from my grievous wounds, and have worked long, though secretly, in Florence."

"Filippo!" she gasped again. Then, with a sudden desperate hope of clearing herself even now, she cried, "You have been wrongly informed. Indeed, 'twas not I who ordered the attack on thy life. Who it was that would fain have done this vile deed, I know not. If I were startled at seeing thee before me, what wonder when I have mourned thee long as dead."

Her face, as she raised it to him, haggard and distraught as it was, still retained some traces of its former beauty.

"Dear Filippo," she whispered, "wherefore hast thou kept us all sorrowing for thee so long? I always loved thee——"

"Silence!" he cried, in tones before which she shrank back quailing. "No words, no protestations avail thee now. Murderess of my mother, thy hour hath come!"

"Filippo, spare me, I slew her not," she panted, but in her heart she knew that it was even as he had said, and that no words, no protestations from those lips which had lied so often, would now avail.

"Thy lies are powerless to help thee," he said sternly. "Old Roberto hath told all in a dying confession, heard by me and two other witnesses. We know now that it was thy hand which placed the poison in the cup under the guise of a love potion to restore my father's affection, which all the household could see was waning, and that it was thou who bribed Roberto to keep the secret. No thanks to thee that the sin of parricide be not on my own head, and that when I vowed to slay the murderer, I waited further proof than my uncle Vieri's conviction as to my father's guilt. Had I not

felt assured in my heart that the truth would come to light I had already had my vengeance. But the hour hath come, and the oath that I swore on my mother's bier shall be accomplished at last. Prepare to die ! "

As he spoke he drew a dagger from the folds of his garment, but with a shriek for help, which echoed through the palace, the wretched woman flung herself on him, twining round him like a snake in a frantic effort to wrench the weapon from his hand. Her strength, however, even in the frenzy of despair, was no match for his, and he flung her from him with a force which hurled her to his feet.

" Mercy, mercy ! " she shrieked, as she crouched before him.

" For such as thou there is no mercy due," he said. " Thou art worse than a murderess, thou art the poisoner of my father's noble soul even as thou wert of my mother's body. No tears, no entreaties shall avail. Die ! "

The dagger was raised on high in one hand as with the other Filippo held his victim in a grasp of iron. But that shriek for aid which she had uttered had been heard, though neither of them had seen the door open in response, and at the moment when the dagger gleamed on high, Filippo's hand was seized from behind in a firm grip, while a low penetrating voice said :

" Wouldst slay a woman ? Moreover, wouldst thou slay her with a" her sins upon her, unconfessed and unshriven ? "

" Leonora ! " cried Filippo hoarsely, letting the dagger fall from his nerveless hand, as he turned and gazed at the

familiar features, which even years and sorrow had not greatly altered. As she faced him, it was as though a sudden light had been turned on in a place of utter darkness, and she seemed to him like a beautiful but stern angel, who had come from some other world than the one of gloom and passion in which he had been plunged. Strange forces, long dormant, though never dead, in his soul, seemed to be stirred within him once more, and the feelings of hatred and revenge which had filled it but an instant before, were passing away like mists which rise and disperse before the light of the morning sun.

"Leonora!" he whispered again. "Is it indeed thou, or am I dreaming?"

"It is I, indeed, Filippo," she said sadly. "Alas, that we meet like this!"

"Leonora, this is no place for thee. This is hell, and thou shouldst live in a pure heaven far from such scenes of hatred and revenge. I do but fulfil my vow, for this is the murderess of my mother."

"Leave your vow to be dealt with by a Higher Power," she said sternly. "There can be no vow which would excuse you for slaying a woman, and she, thy father's own wife. Hath she not, in truth, punishment enough already?" she continued, turning towards the miserable Lucia who, crouched before him, her features distorted, her eyes filled with an anguish of dread. "Her husband hath gone forth in all probability to his death. All her evil schemes have ended in naught. She is punished enough, Filippo. Leave her to her God."

"Leonora, you are an angel, sent, I believe, by that God, to save her from death at my hands and my soul

from a black crime. 'Tis true that no vow of revenge could bind me to the slaying of a woman. 'Twould be like striking a man in the dark and behind his back, since women are defenceless creatures given to men to be protected and not ordained by nature for fighting. Woman, you can go ! "

But it was too late. Another vengeance than that of her private enemy was at hand for the woman who had counted no crime as too great in her efforts to gain power, and Florence herself, whom she had sought to betray, was to be her avenger.

The barricade leading towards the hospital, known as the Stinche, had been broken down, as Filippo had said, and even while the scene just described took place, the Florentine mob was in the palace.

" Corso, Corso ! " they shouted. " Death to Corso ! Down with the Baron of Ill-fame ! "

At the sound of their approach, Leonora rushed back to the room where she had left Gemma and the children, filled with apprehension for their safety, but as Lucia or Filippo could follow her, the crowd was too near to be avoided.

Filippo closed and bolted the door, but as both he and Lucia realised, it could be soon forced open by the pressure of many shoulders from without.

The next moment the mob was there, howling and cursing as a dozen or more of the foremost flung themselves against the door. The news of Corso's escape on his swiftest steed had already spread through the palace, and cheated once more of the Baron of Ill-fame as their prey, the lowest part of the mob were prepared to turn the full tide of their baffled rage against Lucia,

who, as the daughter of Uguccione, had long been detested by the people.

As she crouched, panic-stricken and terrified, in the far corner of the room, the cries from outside drew nearer.

"Down with the foreign traitress! Down with Corso's leman! Down with Uguccione's daughter!"

With a shriek, she threw herself before Filippo.

"Save me, Filippo! Save me!" she cried.

Even as she did so, the moment of her doom drew near. The door fell in with a mighty crash, and before her half-dazed eyes swarmed a confused mass of wild faces filled with hatred and brute animal passion.

"Save me, Filippo! Save me!" she shrieked again, hiding her face against him.

"For the sake of her who hath just left us, and who shares with you the same sex, that she as much enobles as you degrade, I will save you, if I can," he said.

As he spoke, he flung off the friar's garb, and revealed himself, fully armed.

"Take this, and stand behind me," he said, handing her the dagger.

The mob was now close upon them.

"He whom you seek hath left," he said, as he faced it with drawn sword. "Would you bring war against a defenceless woman?"

"Aye, that we would," cried a rough voice, "when that woman is the traitress who would destroy our liberties. 'Tis she, no doubt, who invited the Lucchese to our gates. Let Uguccione's daughter suffer the penalty she deserves."

"Back, back!" he shouted, but the foremost man in the crowd rushed forward as he spoke, and fell to the

ground pierced by a thrust from his sword. For a moment the rest hesitated, as he had hoped they would when they saw one of their number dead before them. But it was for a moment only. There was a sudden shout and a wild rush, and Fillipo found himself hemmed in on all sides. Still he thrust with his sword to right and to left of him, calling out to Lucia, as he did so, to keep well behind, all his soul now bent on saving the woman he had come to slay.

"Down with this fellow! He himself is a Donati!" cried one of the crowd, who suddenly recognised the likeness to the family in the face before him; and with these words the last hope of escape was over. In another minute Filippo himself was struck down and fell at Lucia's feet bleeding from many wounds. There was now no protection between her and the furious mob, but as they drew near to seize her, the blood of her race filled her with the courage for one last desperate act.

"If I must be slain, no hand but my own shall do the deed," she said, and plunged the dagger in her heart.

CHAPTER XXXVI

LAST ESCAPE OF CORSO

WHEN Corso left the room which soon after witnessed such tragic events, he had gone with all dispatch to the stables, and mounting the swiftest steed that they contained, had succeeded in escaping from the palace, and was soon in rapid flight towards the open country. Some few of his followers started with him, but at an early stage of the flight they were attacked and slain, and Corso, who it would seem, once more bore a charmed life, out-stripped his pursuers and emerged alone from the city gates.

For a moment he drew rein and paused to breathe, then on again! He had escaped, but who could say for how long. Every moment might bring his pursuers nearer, every moment render his chance of freedom less secure. On, on again, for even a second's delay might prove fatal.

One wish alone now animated him—that he might be spared the last bitter humiliation of being brought back a captive to the city over which he had sought to rule. Only to get away from Florence, only to escape from the scene of both his triumph and his downfall, was the desire which caused him to set spurs in his horse's sides until they were red.

With foaming mouth and dilated nostrils, the good animal responded and dashed forward with lightning-like speed.

Night had gathered now, and Corso could hardly see whither he was going. On'y the faint light of a rising moon showed trees and rocks as dim shadowy outlines, and once or twice his horse stumbled and nearly fell, to be pulled up by a desperate rein. Then fever seized him in its grip. Agonizing gouty pain racked his body, crippled his feet, and caused torture in the hands which still gripped the reins. Still on, on. On, away from Florence, though the sky seemed to reel around him and the sobbing whispers of the wind sounded to his disordered fancy like the voices of pursuing fiends. Then, suddenly, the present vanished. He was no longer a fugitive fleeing at all costs from Florence. His surroundings became obliterated from his mental perception by a flood of memory, and the past swept over his soul as it is said to do over that of a drowning man.

Piccarda appeared to him, a ghostly figure in the moonlight; Piccarda, her fair face distorted with anguish, as it had been on the evening when she had fallen senseless at her husband's feet. "Slay me, brother," she seemed once more to wail in heartbroken accents ere she vanished.

It was surely Agnese now who addressed him. Agnese, who pierced his soul with gentle pathetic glances of forgiveness and love, so much harder to bear than her wrath and hatred would have been.

And now the mocking laughter of Lucia surely echoed from near by.

With a gigantic effort his fevered brain strove to free itself from these torturing visions.

Again his horse stumbled, and as his aching, swollen hands pulled him up, he forced his mind back to the present.

He was alone in the night. The visions which had haunted him were visions only. He must not allow himself to dream, or all might yet be lost. On, on, good horse. On, on, no matter whither, on to Heli itself if need be, but never back to Florence.

But now the animal's strength began to fail, and in vain he strove, with strained muscles and dilated nostrils, to keep to his former pace.

Ah! What was that before him on the ground?

Simone's corpse, Simone, his beautiful body stained with blood, and his curls lying limp on a brow wet with the dews of death!

Again his iron will had to seize the fever-stricken brain and force it to abandon its delusions. For now it seemed that it was Filippo, his first-born, who confronted him—Filippo, with a face stern and grave beyond his years, and eyes filled with hatred and reproach, who stood and barred the way before him.

"My mother's murderer!" he thought to hear him say in cold, accusing tones which echoed through the chill night air.

He pulled the reins with so sudden a jerk that the animal reared and nearly threw him.

There was nothing really there, save the dark shadows from a cypress by the wayside, and the dull, mysterious whisperings of the night. But hark! what sounds were those? Was his imagination still playing him

false, or, mingled with the sighing of the wind, did he hear the sound of other footsteps than those of his own horse? He strained his ear, while still urging on the animal. No, it was no delusion; this time, alas! the rapidly approaching sounds were no trick of his disordered brain.

Other horsemen were in pursuit, were gaining on him at every step. Faster, faster, good steed! On, on, even if you drop dead at last! Away, away, anywhere out of reach of the pursuers.

But it was no longer of any avail to urge on the wearied animal. With every nerve and muscle strained to its utmost, he sought to respond to his master's will, but his efforts were powerless against his exhausted strength. Once more he stumbled and nearly fell, but struggling, panting, he rose to his feet and plunged forward again. Meanwhile, the regular beat of other hoofs grew ever nearer and nearer, and at last escape was no longer possible, and a little band of armed troops overtook and surrounded the fugitive.

The game was up now, and all the hopes and ambitions of the haughty noble were centred in the one wish to be slain then and there by those rough hands, rather than to be led back in ignominious captivity to the city he had sought to rule.

With prayers and threats and entreaties he implored this one boon; but it was no part of his capturers' plan, to slay him there in secrecy. Their object was to take him back to Florence where the full penalty of his sentence could be publicly enforced.

Corso was seized and bound and placed again on his horse, and, surrounded by the armed band, he was led towards Florence.

With hands and feet now almost powerless from the ravages of his complaint, one desperate mode of escape still presented itself to his mind, and as they approached the Monastery of San Salvi, a few miles outside the city walls, he made the only movement of which his bound and disabled body was capable, and rolled from his horse to the ground.

This unexpected event caused sudden consternation to his guard, who, not realizing his helpless physical condition, were seized with the fear that he might even now effect his escape, and, in the subsequent confusion, one overzealous soldier did him the unwilling kindness for which he craved, by inflicting a mortal wound.

Terrified at the result, on perceiving the apparently dying condition of their captive, the little band left him where he lay, and fled rapidly from the spot.

Soon the last echo of their horses' hoofs died away in the distance, and the wounded man lay alone in the night.

A cold wind swept over his fevered form, and dark clouds hid the face of the moon. Corso moved uneasily. His eyes opened, and partial consciousness returned. Through his brain stole some of the phantoms which had haunted him before.

Lucia was there, mocking him : Lucia with her beauty distorted by the evil passions of her soul. He was parched with thirst which seemed like fire in his throat, and she held a goblet to his lips. He must drink it, at all costs he must drink it, but as he was about to do so, it seemed as if the voice of Vieri dei Cerchi, Vieri, his enemy, whom he had not met in friendship since the night of Agnese's death, uttered a warning cry, and he flung aside the cup in terror.

And della Bella was present; the eager, sensitive face of the man he hated, gazed into his with triumph.

"It is thus Florence repays her tyrants," it seemed to say.

A crowd was surely behind, a crowd of citizens as he had seen it when he had ridden triumphant through Florence. He had laughed then, as he had stopped their curses with the sword, as he had turned them from their homes by fire. Would that those curses would cease now! He must not stay, all Florence was upon him, the wild mob was there as it had been when he had escaped from the roof of the Bargello. They would tear him limb from limb if they overtook him. He tried to rise, and the agony of the effort again brought on unconsciousness.

When next he awoke, a merciful exhaustion kept his wandering fancies from the frenzy which before had tortured him. He no longer felt pain, for a numbness was rapidly creeping over him. He fancied that he was living in those earlier happier days when life, with all its possibilities for good and for evil, lay before him. Piccarda drew near, singing sweet songs of Paradise. He raised his hand to try to detain her, but as he did so, she vanished from before him. Agnese bent over him, yes, it was Agnese this time, her gentle, homey face lit up with tenderness and love, her soft hand ready to soothe as it had ever been of yore.

"Agnese," he groaned, "can you forgive me?"

The wind sobbed fitfully among the trees in reply.

Suddenly the dark clouds above parted, and the moon sent forth a mild radiance. It bathed the dying man in its soft, beneficent light, and on his storm-tossed

soul something of its soothing influence seemed to fall. The tortured body was growing very faint now, and from the soul about to start forth on that dim mysterious journey beyond the mortal veil, the mists and clouds of passion that had obscured it so long were fading slowly away.

All thoughts of the woman who had exercised so strong an influence for ill over the last twelve years of his life seemed to fade with them. He was floating down a rapid stream, and there was a rushing in his ears as of great waters, while strange, vivid lights danced before his vision. Away, away let those waters bear him, away from Florence and the memory of his downfall and disgrace. But the sense of drifting waters, the confused vision of light, changed rapidly with the fast ebbing consciousness of the dying man. He was plunged now in an abyss filled with evil presences who pressed upon him until escape seemed hopeless; but at the moment when it appeared as though he would be suffocated it was as if some unseen hand drew him gently away, back to the fresh air and the light of day once more. Perhaps it was really so. Perhaps his soul, so long stifled by base and worldly passions, was about to be rescued from that abyss in which it had dwelt, and would emerge cleansed and purified by the last dread ordeal of death.

But at the final moment the soul of Corso, hovering on the brink of the last journey of possible purification and of unknown destiny, returned for one brief second to its earthly surroundings.

The confused and blurred visions of approaching dissolution vanished, and a moment of clear consciousness followed.

In that one gleam Corso knew that his end had come, and swift and triumphant there flashed through his dying brain the thought that he would, after all, be spared the agony of a public execution.

"Florence is cheated of her prey," he muttered, and with a smile of satisfaction on his lips, breathed his last.

Thus did Corso Donati, the Baron of Ill-fame, escape for the last time from the wrath of the Florentines.

CHAPTER XXXVII

DAWN

IN a chamber of the Donati Palace a few nights later, Leonora watched over the couch on which Filippo lay. All was silent within the room, though from outside the palace walls the sound of hoarse voices could be faintly heard, mingled sometimes with a shriek or a groan, for Florence had not yet settled down, and brawling still took place in the streets.

Presently a slight movement from the couch drew Leonora closer to it.

"Did you call me?" she asked, bending over the man who lay there.

"I would but assure my eyes that you were really there," he said, with a smile on his pale lips. "Leonora, you are to me like a draught of water in a parched land. There is in my soul a peace and happiness such as have been far distant from me since the day when my mother died, and which, but for you, I should never have known again. Not only was it you who saved me from a deadly sin, but it is you who through all these years have kept my soul, as it were, alive within me. . . . The night is nearly over, is it not? By the light of approaching dawn I would fain feast my eyes on those features which, to me, are more than aught else on earth. Sit there facing me, dear Leonora, so that the first rays of the rising sun may fall on you."

She obeyed, returning the adoring gaze of the man she loved with a look of tender devotion which illuminated her face as with a divine radiance.

"For long," he continued, "did I not live in a hell far from you, and from the tender influence of your soul on mine? It is now as though I had been dead and as if in death all the dark passions of the past had faded away like an evil dream, and I had re-created that truer self which you once knew. All those currents of my being which flowed in pure streams of high endeavour and lofty ideals when inspired by you, are released once more. It is to you that I owe it, if they are not entirely dried up, for even in my darkest hour the thought of my early love kept them alive within me. One grief alone oppresses me now, the thought of my father estranged from me for so long. He was capable of great deeds, and too late I forgive him all the wrong he hath wrought."

"It is never too late," said Leonora gently, as she smoothed his brow with tender touch. "The forgiveness you feel will send its healing streams over your own soul, and who is to say that it will not reach your father too, beyond the grave? Let us, at any rate, cling to that hope, and for his sake and for that of my own noble father endeavour to help forward the dawn of a brighter day in Florence."

"If I recover from my wounds, I will devote my life to that object," he said. "And in truth I feel as though it were impossible for me to die when so sweet a presence beckons me back to life."

"I, too, am convinced that you will recover," she said gently. "Florence hath need of you, and you will live to serve her."

"And to serve you, my beloved," he whispered. "Leonora, can you indeed take me back into your heart and life as you once promised to do if I ever sought you again?"

"Take you back into my heart and life!" she cried, with a rush of passion. "Oh, Filippo, my own, my love, how can I do that when you have never for one moment left them? But see," she continued after a pause more eloquent to either heart than speech, "the night hath passed and the dawn is here."

She rose as she spoke and flung open the casement, letting in a flood of rosy light, and touched with that glow as with a glory, the lips of the lovers met in a solemn kiss of betrothal.

THE END.

